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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FROM THE MEMOIRS OF A MINISTER OF FRANCE ***

Note:

In this Etext, text in italics has been written in capital letters.

Many French words in the text have accents, etc. which have been omitted.

FROM THE MEMOIRS OF A MINISTER OF FRANCE

BY

STANLEY WEYMAN

CONTENTS.

- I.— [THE CLOCKMAKER OF POISSY](#)
- II.— [THE TENNIS BALLS](#)
- III.— [TWO MAYORS OF BOTTITORT](#)
- IV.— [LA TOUSSAINT](#)
- V.— [THE LOST CIPHER](#)
- VI.— [THE MAN OF MONCEAUX](#)
- VII.— [THE GOVERNOR OF GUERET](#)
- VIII.— [THE OPEN SHUTTER](#)
- IX.— [THE MAID OF HONOUR](#)
- X.— [FARMING THE TAXES](#)
- XI.— [THE CAT AND THE KING](#)
- XII.— [AT FONTAINEBLEAU](#)

I.

THE CLOCKMAKER OF POISSY.

Foreseeing that some who do not love me will be swift to allege that in the preparation of these memoirs I have set down only such things as redound to my credit, and have suppressed the many experiences not so propitious which fall to the lot of the most sagacious while in power, I take this opportunity of refuting that calumny. For the truth stands so far the other way that my respect for the King's person has led me to omit many things creditable to me; and some, it may be, that place me in a higher light than any I have set down. And not only that: but I propose in this very place to narrate the curious details of an adventure wherein I showed to less advantage than usual; and on which I should, were I moved by the petty feelings imputed to me by malice, be absolutely silent.

One day, about a fortnight after the quarrel between the King and the Duchess of Beaufort, which I have described, and which arose, it will be remembered, out of my refusal to pay the christening expenses of her second son on the scale of a child of France, I was sitting in my lodgings at St. Germain when Maignan announced that M. de Perrot desired to see me. Knowing Perrot to be one of the most notorious beggars about the court, with an insatiable maw of his own and an endless train of nephews and nieces, I was at first for being employed; but, reflecting that in the crisis in the King's affairs which I saw approaching—and which must, if he pursued his expressed intention of marrying the Duchess, be fraught with infinite danger to the State and himself—the least help might be of the greatest moment, I bade them admit him; privately determining to throw the odium of any refusal upon the overweening influence of Madame de Sourdis, the Duchess's aunt.

Accordingly I met him with civility, and was not surprised when, with his second speech, he brought out the word FAVOUR. But I was surprised—for, as I have said, I knew him to be the best practised beggar in the world—to note in his manner some indications of embarrassment and nervousness; which, when I did not immediately assent, increased to a sensible extent.

"It is a very small thing, M. de Rosny," he said, breathing hard.

On that hint I declared my willingness to serve him. "But," I added, shrugging my shoulders and speaking in a confidential tone, "no one knows the Court better than you do, M. de Perrot. You are in all our secrets, and you must be aware that at present—I say nothing of the Duchess, she is a good woman, and devoted to his Majesty—but there are others—"

"I know," he answered, with a flash of malevolence that did not escape me. "But this is a private favour, M. de Rosny. It is nothing that Madame de Sourdis can desire, either for herself or for others."

That aroused my curiosity. Only the week before, Madame de Sourdis had obtained a Hat for her son, and the post of assistant Deputy Comptroller of Buildings for her Groom of the Chambers. For her niece the Duchess she meditated obtaining nothing less than a crown. I was at pains, therefore, to think of any office, post, or pension that could be beyond the pale of her desires; and in a fit of gaiety I bade M. de Perrot speak out and explain his riddle.

"It is a small thing," he said, with ill-disguised nervousness. "The King hunts to-morrow."

"Yes," I said.

"And very commonly he rides back in your company, M. le Marquis."

"Sometimes," I said; "or with M. d'Epernon. Or, if he is in a mood for scandal, with M. la Varenne or Vitry."

"But with you, if you wish it, and care to contrive it so," he persisted, with a cunning look.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well?" I said, wondering more and more what he would be at.

"I have a house on the farther side of Poissy," he continued. "And I should take it as a favour, M. de Rosny, if you could induce the King to dismount there to-morrow and take a cup of wine."

"That is a very small thing," I said bluntly, wondering much why he had made so great a parade of the matter, and still more why he seemed so ill at ease. "Yet, after such a prelude, if any but a friend of your tried loyalty asked it, I might expect to find Spanish liquorice in the cup."

"That is out of the question, in my case," he answered with a slight assumption of offence, which he immediately dropped. "And you say it is a small thing; it is the more easily granted, M. de Rosny."

"But the King goes and comes at his pleasure," I replied warily. "Of course, he might take it

into his head to descend at your house. There would be nothing surprising in such a visit. I think that he has paid you one before, M. de Perrot?"

He assented eagerly.

"And he may do so," I said, smiling, "to-morrow. But then, again, he may not. The chase may lead him another way; or he may be late in returning; or—in fine, a hundred things may happen."

I had no mind to go farther than that; and I supposed that it would satisfy him, and that he would thank me and take his leave. To my surprise, however, he stood his ground, and even pressed me more than was polite; while his countenance, when I again eluded him, assumed an expression of chagrin and vexation so much in excess of the occasion as to awaken fresh doubts in my mind. But these only the more confirmed me in my resolution to commit myself no farther, especially as he was not a man I loved or could trust; and in the end he had to retire with such comfort as I had already given him.

In itself, and on the surface, the thing seemed to be a trifle, unworthy of the serious consideration of any man. But in so far as it touched the King's person and movements, I was inclined to view it in another light; and this the more, as I still had fresh in my memory the remarkable manner in which Father Cotton, the Jesuit, had given me a warning by a word about a boxwood fire. After a moment's thought, therefore, I summoned Boisrueil, one of my gentlemen, who had an acknowledged talent for collecting gossip; and I told him in a casual way that M. de Perrot had been with me.

"He has not been at Court for a week," he remarked.

"Indeed?" I said.

"He applied for the post of Assistant Deputy Comptroller of Buildings for his nephew, and took offence when it was given to Madame de Sourdis' Groom of the Chambers."

"Ha!" I said; "a dangerous malcontent."

Boisrueil smiled. "He has lived a week out of the sunshine of his Majesty's countenance, your excellency. After that, all things are possible."

This was my own estimate of the man, whom I took to be one of those smug, pliant self-seekers whom Courts and peace breed up. I could imagine no danger that could threaten the King from such a quarter; while curiosity inclined me to grant his request. As it happened, the deer the next day took us in the direction of Poissy, and the King, who was always itching to discuss with me the question of his projected marriage, and as constantly, since our long talk in the garden at Rennes, avoiding the subject when with me, bade me ride home with him. On coming within half a mile of Perrot's I let fall his name, and in a very natural way suggested that the King should alight there for a few minutes.

It was one of the things Henry delighted to do, for, endowed with the easiest manners, and able in a moment to exchange the formality of the Louvre for the freedom of the camp, he could give to such cheap favours their full value. He consented on the instant, therefore; and turning our horses into a by-road, we sauntered down it with no greater attendance than a couple of pages.

The sun was near setting, and its rays, which still gilded the tree-tops, left the wood below pensive and melancholy. The house stood in a solitary place on the edge of the forest, half a mile from Poissy; and these two things had their effect on my mind. I began to wish that we had brought with us half a troop of horse, or at least two or three gentlemen; and, startled by the thought of the unknown chances to which, out of mere idle curiosity, I was exposing the King, I would gladly have turned back. But without explanation I could not do so; and while I hesitated Henry cried out gaily that we were there.

A short avenue of limes led from the forest road to the door. I looked curiously before us as we rode under the trees, in some fear lest M. de Perrot's preparations should discover my complicity, and apprise the King that he was expected. But so far was this from being the case that no one appeared; the house rose still and silent in the mellow light of sunset, and, for all that we could see, might have been the fabled palace of enchantment.

"He is Jean de Nivelles's dog; he runs away when you call him," the King quoted. "Get down, Rosny. We have reached the palace of the Sleeping Princess. It remains only to sound the horn, and—"

I was in the act of dismounting, with my back to him, when his words came to this sudden stop. I turned to learn what caused it, and saw standing in the aperture of the wicket, which had been silently opened, a girl, little more than a child, of the most striking beauty. Surprise shone in her eyes, and shyness and alarm had brought the colour to her cheeks; while the level rays of the sun, which forced her to screen her eyes with one small hand, clothed her figure in a robe of lucent glory. I heard the King whistle low. Before I could speak he had flung himself from his horse and, throwing the reins to one of the pages, was bowing before her.

"We were about to sound the horn, Mademoiselle," he said, smiling.

"The horn, Monsieur?" she exclaimed, opening her eyes in wonder, and staring at him with the prettiest face of astonishment.

"Yes, Mademoiselle; to awaken the sleeping princess," he rejoined. "But I see that she is already awake."

Through the innocence of her eyes flashed a sudden gleam of archness. "Monsieur flatters himself," she said, with a smile that just revealed the whiteness of her teeth.

It was such an answer as delighted the King; who loved, above all things, a combination of wit and beauty, and never for any long time wore the chains of a woman who did not unite sense to more showy attractions. From the effect which the grace and freshness of the girl had on me, I could judge in a degree of the impression made on him; his next words showed not only its depth, but that he was determined to enjoy the adventure to the full. He presented me to her as M. de Sage, and inquiring affectionately after Perrot, learned in a trice that she was his niece, not long from a convent at Loches; finally, begging to be allowed to rest awhile, he dropped a gallant hint that a cup of wine from her hands would be acceptable.

All this, and her innocent doubt what she ought to do, thus brought face to face with two strange cavaliers, threw the girl into such a state of blushing confusion as redoubled her charms. It appeared that her uncle had been summoned unexpectedly to Marly, and had taken his son with him; and that the household had seized the occasion to go to a village FETE at Acheres. Only an old servant remained in the house; who presently appeared and took her orders. I saw from the man's start of consternation that he knew the King; but a glance from Henry's eyes bidding me keep up the illusion, I followed the fellow and charged him not to betray the King's incognito. When I returned, I found that Mademoiselle had conducted her visitor to a grassy terrace which ran along the south side of the house, and was screened from the forest by an alley of apple trees, and from the east wind by a hedge of yew. Here, where the last rays of the sun threw sinuous shadows on the turf, and Paris seemed a million miles away, they were walking up and down, the sound of their laughter breaking the woodland silence. Mademoiselle had a fan, with which and an air of convent coquetry she occasionally shaded her eyes. The King carried his hat in his hand. It was such an adventure as he loved, with all his heart; and I stood a little way off, smiling, and thinking grimly of M. de Perrot.

On a sudden, hearing a step behind me, I turned, and saw a young man in a riding-dress come quickly through an opening in the yew hedge. As I turned, he stopped; his jaw fell, and he stood rooted to the ground, gazing at the two on the terrace, while his face, which a moment before had worn an air of pleased expectancy, grew on a sudden dark with passion, and put on such a look as made me move towards him. Before I reached him, However, M. de Perrot himself appeared at his side. The young man flashed round on him. "MON DIEU, sir!" he cried, in a voice choked with anger; "I see it all now! I understand why I was carried away to Marly! I—but it shall not be! I swear it shall not!"

Between him and me—for, needless to say, I, too, understood all—M. de Perrot was awkwardly placed. But he showed the presence of mind of the old courtier. "Silence, sir!" He exclaimed imperatively. "Do you not see M. de Rosny? Go to him at once and pay your respects to him, and request him to honour you with his protection. Or—I see that you are overcome by the honour which the King does us. Go, first, and change your dress. Go, boy!"

The lad retired sullenly, and M. de Perrot, free to deal with me alone, approached me, smiling assiduously, and trying hard to hide some consciousness and a little shame under a mask of cordiality. "A thousand pardons, M. de Rosny," he cried with effusion, "for an absence quite unpardonable. But I so little expected to see his Majesty after what you said, and—"

"Are in no hurry to interrupt him now you are here," I replied bluntly, determined that, whoever he deceived, he should not flatter himself he deceived me. "Pooh, man! I am not a fool," I continued.

"What is this?" he cried, with a desperate attempt to keep up the farce. "I don't understand you!"

"No, the shoe is on the other foot—I understand you," I replied drily. "Chut, man!" I continued, "you don't make a cat's-paw of me. I see the game. You are for sitting in Madame de Sourdis' seat, and giving your son a Hat, and your groom a Comptrollership, and your niece a—"

"Hush, hush, M. de Rosny," he muttered, turning white and red, and wiping his brow with his kerchief. "MON DIEU! your words might—"

"If overheard, make things very unpleasant for M. de Perrot," I said.

"And M. de Rosny?"

I shrugged my shoulders contemptuously. "Tush, man!" I said. "Do you think that I sit in no safer seat than that?"

"Ah! But when Madame de Beaufort is Queen?" he said slyly.

"If she ever is," I replied, affecting greater confidence than I at that time felt.

"Well, to be sure," he said slowly, "if she ever is." And he looked towards the King and his companion, who were still chatting gaily. Then he stole a crafty glance at me. "Do you wish her to be?" he muttered.

"Queen?" I said, "God forbid!"

"It would be a disgrace to France?" he whispered; and he laid his hand on my arm, and looked eagerly into my face.

"Yes," I said.

"A blot on his fame?"

I nodded.

"A—a slur on a score of noble families?"

I could not deny it.

"Then—is it not worth while to avoid all that?" he murmured, his face pale, and his small eyes glued to mine. "Is it not worth a little—sacrifice, M. de Rosny?"

"And risk?" I said. "Possibly."

While the words were still on my lips, something stirred close to us, behind the yew hedge beside which we were standing. Perrot darted in a moment to the opening, and I after him. We were just in time to catch a glimpse of a figure disappearing round the corner of the house. "Well," I said grimly, "what about being overheard now?"

M. de Perrot wiped his face. "Thank Heaven!" he said, "it was only my son. Now let me explain to you—"

But our hasty movement had caught the King's eye, and he came towards us, covering himself as he approached. I had now an opportunity of learning whether the girl was, in fact, as innocent as she seemed, and as every particular of our reception had declared her; and I watched her closely when Perrot's mode of address betrayed the King's identity. Suffice it that the vivid blush which on the instant suffused her face, and the lively emotion which almost overcame her, left me in no doubt. With a charming air of bashfulness, and just so much timid awkwardness as rendered her doubly bewitching, she tried to kneel and kiss the King's hand. He would not permit this, however, but saluted her cheek.

"It seems that you were right, sire," she murmured, curtsying in a pretty confusion, "The princess was not awake."

Henry laughed gaily. "Come now; tell me frankly, Mademoiselle," he said. "For whom did you take me?"

"Not for the King, sire," she answered, with a gleam of roguishness. "You told me that the King was a good man, whose benevolent impulses were constantly checked—"

"Ah!"

"By M. de Rosny, his Minister."

The outburst of laughter which greeted this apprised her that she was again at fault; and Henry, who liked nothing better than such mystifications, introducing me by my proper name, we diverted ourselves for some minutes with her alarm and excuses. After that it was time to take leave, if we would sup at home and the King would not be missed; and accordingly, but not without some further badinage, in which Mademoiselle de Brut displayed wit equal to her beauty, and an agreeable refinement not always found with either, we departed.

It should be clearly understood at this point, that, notwithstanding all I have set down, I was fully determined (in accordance with a rule I have constantly followed, and would enjoin on all who do not desire to find themselves one day saddled with an ugly name) to have no part in the affair; and this though the advantage of altering the King's intentions towards Madame de Beaufort was never more vividly present to my mind. As we rode, indeed, he put several questions concerning the Baron, and his family, and connections; and, falling into a reverie, and smiling a good deal at his thoughts, left me in no doubt as to the impression made upon him. But being engaged at the time with the Spanish treaty, and resolved, as I have said, to steer a course uninfluenced by such intrigues, I did not let my mind dwell upon the matter; nor gave it, indeed, a second thought until the next afternoon, when, sitting at an open window of my lodging, I heard a voice in the street ask where the Duchess de Beaufort had her apartment.

The voice struck a chord in my memory, and I looked out. The man who had put the question,

and who was now being directed on his way—by Maignan, my equerry, as it chanced had his back to me, and I could see only that he was young, shabbily dressed, and with the air of a workman carried a small frail of tools on his shoulder. But presently, in the act of thanking Maignan, he turned so that I saw his face, and with that it flashed upon me in a moment who he was.

Accustomed to follow a train of thought quickly, and to act; on its conclusion with energy, I had Maignan called and furnished with his instructions before the man had gone twenty paces; and within the minute I had the satisfaction of seeing the two return together. As they passed under the window I heard my servant explaining with the utmost naturalness that he had misunderstood the stranger, and that this was Madame de Beaufort's; after which scarce a minute elapsed before the door of my room opened, and he appeared ushering in young Perrot!

Or so it seemed to me; and the start of surprise and consternation which escaped the stranger when he first saw me confirmed me in the impression. But a moment later I doubted; so natural was the posture into which the man fell, and so stupid the look of inquiry which he turned first on me and then on Maignan. As he stood before me, shifting his feet and staring about him in vacant wonder, I began to think that I had made a mistake; and, clearly, either I had done so or this young man was possessed of talents and a power of controlling his features beyond the ordinary. He unslung his tools, and saluting me abjectly waited in silence. After a moment's thought, I asked him peremptorily what was his errand with the Duchess de Beaufort.

"To show her a watch, your excellency," he stammered, his mouth open, his eyes staring. I could detect no flaw in his acting.

"What are you, then?" I said.

"A clockmaker, my lord."

"Has Madame sent for you?"

"No, my lord," he stuttered, trembling.

"Do you want to sell her the watch?"

He muttered that he did; and that he meant no harm by it.

"Show it to me, then," I said curtly.

He grew red at that, and seemed for an instant not to understand. But on my repeating the order he thrust his hand into his breast, and producing a parcel began to unfasten it. This he did so slowly that I was soon for thinking that there was no watch in it; but in the end he found one and handed it to me.

"You did not make this," I said, opening it.

"No, my lord," he answered; "it is German, and old."

I saw that it was of excellent workmanship, and I was about to hand it back to him, almost persuaded that I had made a mistake, when in a second my doubts were solved. Engraved on the thick end of the egg, and partly erased by wear, was a dog's head, which I knew to be the crest of the Perrots.

"So," I said, preparing to return it to him, "you are a clockmaker?"

"Yes, your excellency," he muttered. And I thought that I caught the sound of a sigh of relief.

I gave the watch to Maignan to hand to him. "Very well," I said. "I have need of one. The clock in the next room—a gift from his Majesty—is out of order, and at a standstill. You can go and attend to it; and see that you do so skilfully. And do you, Maignan," I continued with meaning, "go with him. When he has made the clock go, let him go; and not before, or you answer for it. You understand, sirrah?"

Maignan saluted obsequiously, and in a moment hurried young Perrot from the room; leaving me to congratulate myself on the strange and fortuitous circumstance that had thrown him in my way, and enabled me to guard against a RENCONTRE that might have had the most embarrassing consequences.

It required no great sagacity to foresee the next move; and I was not surprised when, about an hour later, I heard a clatter of hoofs outside, and a voice inquiring hurriedly for the Marquis de Rosny. One of my people announced M. de Perrot, and I bade them admit him. In a twinkling he came up, pale with heat, and covered with dust, his eyes almost starting from his head and his cheeks trembling with agitation. Almost before the door was shut, he cried out that we were undone.

I was willing to divert myself with him for a time, and I pretended to know nothing. "What?" I said, rising. "Has the King met with an accident?"

"Worse! worse!" he cried, waving his hat with a gesture of despair. "My son—you saw my son

yesterday?"

"Yes," I said.

"He overheard us!"

"Not us," I said drily. "You. But what then, M. de Perrot? You are master in your own house."

"But he is not in my house," he wailed. "He has gone! Fled! Decamped! I had words with him this morning, you understand."

"About your niece?"

M. de Perrot's face took a delicate shade of red, and he nodded; he could not speak. He seemed for an instant in danger of some kind of fit. Then he found his voice again. "The fool prated of love! Of love!" he said with such a look—like that of a dying fowl—that I could have laughed aloud. "And when I bade him remember his duty he threatened me. He, that unnatural boy, threatened to betray me, to ruin me, to go to Madame de Beaufort and tell her all—all, you understand. And I doing so much, and making such sacrifices for him!"

"Yes," I said, "I see that. And what did you do?"

"I broke my cane on his back," M. de Perrot answered with unction, "and locked him in his room. But what is the use? The boy has no natural feelings!"

"He got out through the window?"

Perrot nodded; and being at leisure, now that he had explained his woes, to feel their full depth, shed actual tears of rage and terror; now moaning that Madame would never forgive him, and that if he escaped the Bastille he would lose all his employments and be the laughing-stock of the Court; and now striving to show that his peril was mine, and that it was to my interest to help him.

I allowed him to go on in this strain for some time, and then, having sufficiently diverted myself with his forebodings, I bade him in an altered voice to take courage. "For I think I know," I said, "where your son is."

"At Madame's?" he groaned.

"No; here," I said.

"MON DIEU! Where?" he cried. And he sprang up, startled out of his lamentations.

"Here; in my lodging," I answered.

"My son is here?" he said.

"In the next room," I replied, smiling indulgently at his astonishment, which was only less amusing than his terror. "I have but to touch this bell, and Maignan will bring him to you."

Full of wonder and admiration, he implored me to ring and have him brought immediately; since until he had set eyes on him he could not feel safe. Accordingly I rang my hand-bell, and Maignan opened the door. "The clockmaker," I said nodding.

He looked at me stupidly. "The clock-maker, your excellency?"

"Yes; bring him in," I said.

"But—he has gone!" he exclaimed.

"Gone?" I cried, scarcely able to believe my ears. "Gone, sirrah! and I told you to detain him!"

"Until he had mended the clock, my lord," Maignan stammered, quite out of countenance. "But he set it going half-an-hour ago; and I let him go, according to your order."

It is in the face of such CONTRETEMPS as these that the low-bred man betrays himself. Yet such was my chagrin on this occasion, and so sudden the shock, that it was all I could do to maintain my SANGFROID, and, dismissing Maignan with a look, be content to punish M. de Perrot with a sneer. "I did not know that your son was a tradesman," I said. He wrung his hands. "He has low tastes," he cried. "He always had. He has amused himself that way, And now by this time he is with Madame de Beaufort and we are undone!"

"Not we," I answered curtly; "speak for yourself, M. de Perrot."

But though, having no mind to appear in his eyes dependent on Madame's favour or caprice, I thus checked his familiarity, I am free to confess that my calmness was partly assumed; and that, though I knew my position to be unassailable—based as it was on solid services rendered to the King, my master, and on the familiar affection with which he honoured me through so many years—I could not view the prospect of a fresh collision with Madame without some misgiving. Having

gained the mastery in the two quarrels we had had, I was the less inclined to excite her to fresh intrigues; and as unwilling to give the King reason to think that we could not live at peace. Accordingly, after a moment's consideration, I told Perrot that, rather than he should suffer, I would go to Madame de Beaufort myself, and give such explanations as would place another complexion on the matter.

He overwhelmed me with thanks, and, besides, to show his gratitude—for he was still on thorns, picturing her wrath and resentment he insisted on accompanying me to the Cloitre de St. Germain, where Madame had her apartment. By the way, he asked me what I should say to her.

"Whatever will get you out of the scrape," I answered curtly.

"Then anything!" he cried with fervour. "Anything, my dear friend. Oh, that unnatural boy!"

"I suppose that the girl is as big a fool?" I said.

"Bigger! bigger!" he answered. "I don't know where she learned such things!"

"She prated of love, too, then?"

"To be sure," he groaned, "and without a sou of DOT!"

"Well, well," I said, "here we are. I will do what I can."

Fortunately the King was not there, and Madame would receive me. I thought, indeed, that her doors flew open with suspicious speed, and that way was made for me more easily than usual; and I soon found that I was not wrong in the inference I drew from these facts. For when I entered her chamber that remarkable woman, who, whatever her enemies may say, combined with her beauty a very uncommon degree of sense and discretion, met me with a low courtesy and a smile of derision. "So," she said, "M. de Rosny, not satisfied with furnishing me with evidence, gives me proof."

"How, Madame?" I said; though I well understood.

"By his presence here," she answered. "An hour ago," she continued, "the King was with me. I had not then the slightest ground to expect this honour, or I am sure that his Majesty would have stayed to share it. But I have since seen reason to expect it, and you observe that I am not unprepared."

She spoke with a sparkling eye, and an expression of the most lively resentment; so that, had M. de Perrot been in my place I think that he would have shed more tears. I was myself somewhat dashed, though I knew the prudence that governed her in her most impetuous sallies; still, to avoid the risk of hearing things which we might both afterwards wish unsaid, I came to the point. "I fear that I have timed my visit ill, Madame," I said. "You have some complaint against me."

"Only that you are like the others," she answered with a fine contempt. "You profess one thing and do another."

"As for example?"

"For example!" she replied, with a scornful laugh. "How many times have you told me that you left women, and intrigues in which women had part, on one side?"

I bowed.

"And now I find you—you and that Perrot, that creature!—intriguing against me; intriguing with some country chit to—"

"Madame!" I said, cutting her short with a show of temper, "where did you get this?"

"Do you deny it?" she cried, looking so beautiful in her anger that I thought I had never seen her to such advantage. "Do you deny that you took the King there?"

"No. Certainly I took the King there."

"To Perrot's? You admit it?"

"Certainly," I said, "for a purpose."

"A purpose!" she cried with withering scorn. "Was it not that the King might see that girl?"

"Yes," I replied patiently, "it was."

She stared at me. "And you can tell me that to my face!" she said.

"I see no reason why I should not, Madame," I replied easily—"I cannot conceive why you should object to the union—and many why you should desire to see two people happy. Otherwise, if I had had any idea, even the slightest, that the matter was obnoxious to you, I would not have

engaged in it."

"But—what was your purpose then?" she muttered, in a different tone.

"To obtain the King's good word with M. de Perrot to permit the marriage of his son with his niece; who is, unfortunately, without a portion."

Madame uttered a low exclamation, and her eyes wandering from me, she took up—as if her thoughts strayed also—a small ornament; from the table beside her. "Ah!" she said, looking at it closely. "But Perrot's son did he know of this?"

"No," I answered, smiling. "But I have heard that women can love as well as men, Madame. And sometimes ingenuously."

I heard her draw a sigh of relief, and I knew that if I had not persuaded her I had accomplished much. I was not surprised when, laying down the ornament with which she had been toying, she turned on me one of those rare smiles to which the King could refuse nothing; and wherein wit, tenderness, and gaiety were so happily blended that no conceivable beauty of feature, uninspired by sensibility, could vie with them. "Good friend, I have sinned," she said. "But I am a woman, and I love. Pardon me. As for your PROTEGEE, from this moment she is mine also. I will speak to the King this evening; and if he does not at once," Madame continued, with a gleam of archness that showed me that she was not yet free from suspicion, "issue his commands to M. de Perrot, I shall know what to think; and his Majesty will suffer!"

I thanked her profusely, and in fitting terms. Then, after a word or two about some assignments for the expenses of her household, in settling which there had been delay—a matter wherein, also, I contrived to do her pleasure and the King's service no wrong—I very willingly took my leave, and, calling my people, started homewards on foot. I had not gone twenty paces, however, before M. de Perrot, whose impatience had chained him to the spot, crossed the street and joined himself to me. "My dear friend," he cried, embracing me fervently, "is all well?"

"Yes," I said.

"She is appeased?"

"Absolutely."

He heaved a deep sigh of relief, and, almost crying in his joy, began to thank me, with all the extravagance of phrase and gesture to which men of his mean spirit are prone. Through all I heard him silently, and with secret amusement, knowing that the end was not yet. At length he asked me what explanation I had given.

"The only explanation possible," I answered bluntly. "I had to combat Madame's jealousy. I did it in the only way in which it could be done: by stating that your niece loved your son, and by imploring her good word on their behalf."

He sprang a pace from me with a cry of rage and astonishment. "You did that?" he screamed.

"Softly, softly, M. de Perrot," I said, in a voice which brought him somewhat to his senses. "Certainly I did. You bade me say whatever was necessary, and I did so. No more. If you wish, however," I added grimly, "to explain to Madame that—"

But with a wail of lamentation he rushed from me, and in a moment was lost in the darkness; leaving me to smile at this odd termination of an intrigue that, but for a lad's adroitness, might have altered the fortunes not of M. de Perrot only but of the King my master and of France.

II.

THE TENNIS BALLS.

A few weeks before the death of the Duchess of Beaufort, on Easter Eve, 1599, made so great a change in the relations of all at Court that "Sourdis mourning" came to be a phrase for grief, genuine because interested, an affair that might have had a serious issue began, imperceptibly at the time, in the veriest trifle.

One day, while the King was still absent from Paris, I had a mind to play tennis, and for that purpose summoned La Trape, who had the charge of my balls, and sometimes, in the absence of better company, played with me. Of late the balls he bought had given me small satisfaction, and I bade him bring me the bag, that I might choose the best. He did so, and I had not handled half-a-dozen before I found one, and later three others, so much more neatly sewn than the rest, and in all points so superior, that even an untrained eye could not fail to detect the difference.

"Look, man!" I said, holding out one of these for his inspection. "These are balls; the rest are rubbish. Cannot you see the difference? Where did you buy these? At Constant's?"

He muttered, "No, my lord," and looked confused.

This roused my curiosity. "Where, then?" I said sharply.

"Of a man who was at the gate yesterday."

"Oh!" I said. "Selling tennis balls?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Some rogue of a marker," I exclaimed, "from whom you bought filched goods! Who was it, man?"

"I don't know his name," La Trape answered. "He was a Spaniard."

"Well?"

"Who wanted to have an audience of your excellency."

"Ho!" I said drily. "Now I understand. Bring me your book. Or, tell me, what have you charged me for these balls?"

"Two francs," he muttered reluctantly.

"And never gave a sou, I'll swear!" I retorted. "You took the poor devil's balls, and left him at the gate! Ay, it is rogues like you get me a bad name!" I continued, affecting more anger than I felt—for, in truth, I was rather pleased with my quickness in discovering the cheat. "You steal and I bear the blame, and pay to boot! Off with you and find the fellow, and bring him to me, or it will be the worse for you!"

Glad to escape so easily, La Trape ran to the gate; but he failed to find his friend, and two or three days elapsed before I thought again of the matter, such petty rogueries being ingrained in a great man's VALETAILLE, and being no more to be removed than the hairs from a man's arm. At the end of that time La Trape came to me, bringing the Spaniard; who had appeared again at the gate. The stranger proved to be a small, slight man, pale and yet brown, with quick-glancing eyes. His dress was decent, but very poor, with more than one rent neatly darned. He made me a profound reverence, and stood waiting, with his cap in his hand, to be addressed; but, with all his humility, I did not fail to detect an easiness of deportment and a propriety that did not seem absolutely strange since he was a Spaniard, but which struck me, nevertheless, as requiring some explanation. I asked him, civilly, who he was. He answered that his name was Diego.

"You speak French?"

"I am of Guipuzcoa, my lord," he answered, "where we sometimes speak three tongues."

"That is true," I said. "And it is your trade to make tennis balls?"

"No, my lord; to use them," he answered with a certain dignity.

"You are a player, then?"

"If it please your excellency."

"Where have you played?"

"At Madrid, where I was the keeper of the Duke of Segovia's court; and at Toledo, where I frequently had the honour of playing against M. de Montserrat."

"You are a good player?"

"If your excellency," he answered impulsively, "will give me an opportunity—"

"Softly, softly," I said, somewhat taken aback by his earnestness. "Granted that you are a player, you seem to have played to small purpose.. Why are you here, my friend, and not in Madrid?"

He drew up his sleeves, and showed me that his wrists were deeply scarred.

I shrugged my shoulders. "You have been in the hands of the Holy Brotherhood?" I said.

"No, my lord," he answered bitterly. "Of the Holy Inquisition."

"You are a Protestant?"

He bowed.

On that I fell to considering him with more attention, but at the same time with some distrust; reflecting that he was a Spaniard, and recalling the numberless plots against his Majesty of which that nation had been guilty. Still, if his tale were true he deserved support; with a view therefore to testing this I questioned him farther, and learned that he had for a long time disguised his opinions, until, opening them in an easy moment to a fellow servant, he found himself upon the first occasion of quarrel betrayed to the Fathers. After suffering much, and giving himself up for lost in their dungeons, he made his escape in a manner sufficiently remarkable, if I might believe his story. In the prison with him lay a Moor, for whose exchange against a Christian taken by the Sallee pirates an order came down. It arrived in the evening; the Moor was to be removed in the morning. An hour after the arrival of the news, however, and when the two had just been locked up for the night, the Moor, overcome with excess of joy, suddenly expired. At first the Spaniard was for giving the alarm; but, being an ingenious fellow, in a few minutes he summoned all his wits together and made a plan. Contriving to blacken his face and hands with charcoal he changed clothes with the corpse, and muffling himself up after the fashion of the Moors in a cold climate he succeeded in the early morning in passing out in his place. Those who had charge of him had no reason to expect an escape, and once on the road he had little difficulty in getting away, and eventually reached France after a succession of narrow chances.

All this the man told me so simply that I knew not which to admire more, the daring of his device—since for a white man to pass for a brown is beyond the common scope of such disguises—or his present modesty in relating it. However, neither of these things seemed to my mind a good reason for disbelief. As to the one, I considered that an impostor would have put forward something more simple; and as to the other, I have all my life long observed that those who have had strange experiences tell them in a very ordinary way. Besides, I had fresh in my mind the diverting escape of the Duke of Nemours from Lyons, which I have elsewhere related. On the other hand, and despite all these things, the story might be false; so with a view to testing one part of it, at least, I bade him come and play with me that afternoon.

"My lord," he said bluntly, "I had rather not. For if I defeat your excellency, I may defeat also your good intentions. And if I permit you to win, I shall seem to be an impostor."

Somewhat surprised by his forethought, I reassured him on this point; and his game, which proved to be one of remarkable strength and finesse, and fairly on an equality, as it seemed to me, with that of the best French players, persuaded me that at any rate the first part of his tale was true. Accordingly I made him a present, and, in addition, bade Maignan pay him a small allowance for a while. For this he showed his gratitude by attaching himself to my household; and as it was the fashion at that time to keep tennis masters of this class, I found it occasionally amusing to pit him against other well-known players. In the course of a few weeks he gained me great credit; and though I am not so foolish as to attach importance to such trifles, but, on the contrary, think an old soldier who stood fast at Coutras, or even a clerk who has served the King honestly—if such a prodigy there be—more deserving than these professors, still I do not err on the other side; but count him a fool who, because he has solid cause to value himself, disdains the ECLAT which the attachment of such persons gives him in the public eye.

The man went by the name of Diego the Spaniard, and his story, which gradually became known, together with the excellence of his play, made him so much the fashion that more than one tried to detach him from my service. The King heard of him, and would have played with him, but the sudden death of Madame de Beaufort, which occurred soon afterwards, threw the Court into mourning; and for a while, in pursuing the negotiations for the King's divorce, and in conducting a correspondence of the most delicate character with the Queen, I lost sight of my player—insomuch, that I scarcely knew whether he still formed part of my suite or not.

My attention was presently recalled to him, however, in a rather remarkable manner. One morning Don Antonio d'Evora, Secretary to the Spanish Embassy, and a brother of that d'Evora who commanded the Spanish Foot at Paris in '94, called on me at the Arsenal, to which I had just removed, and desired to see me. I bade them admit him; but as my secretaries were at the time at work with me, I left them and received him in the garden—supposing that he wished to speak to me, about the affair of Saluces, and preferring, like the King my master, to talk of matters of State in the open air.

However, I was mistaken. Don Antonio said nothing about Savoy, but after the usual preliminaries, which a Spaniard never omits, plunged into a long harangue upon the comity which, now that peace reigned, should exist between the two nations. For some time I waited patiently to learn what he would be at; but he seemed to be lost in his own eloquence, and at last I took him up.

"All this is very well, M. d'Evora," I said. "I quite agree with you that the times are changed, that amity is not the same thing as war, and that a grain of sand in the eye is unpleasant," for he had said all of these things. "But I fail, being a plain man and no diplomatist, to see what you want me to do."

"It is the smallest matter," he said, waving his hand gracefully.

"And yet," I retorted, "you seem to find a difficulty in coming at it."

"As you do at the grain of sand in the eye," he answered wittily. "After all, however, in what you say, M. de Rosny, there is some truth. I feel that I am, on delicate ground; but I am sure that you will pardon me. You have in your suite a certain Diego."

"It may be so," I said, masking my surprise, and affecting indifference.

"A tennis-player."

I shrugged my shoulders. "The man is known," I said.

"A Protestant?"

"It is not impossible."

"And a subject of the King, my master. A man," Don Antonio continued, with increasing stiffness, "in fine, M. de Rosny, who, after committing various offences, murdered his comrade in prison, and, escaping in his clothes, took refuge in this country."

I shrugged my shoulders again.

"I have no knowledge of that," I said coldly.

"No, or I am sure that you would not harbour the fellow," the secretary answered. "Now that you do know it, however, I take it for granted that you will dismiss him? If you held any but the great place you do hold, M. de Rosny, it would be different; but all the world see who follow you, and this man's presence stains you, and is an offence to my master."

"Softly, softly, M. d'Evora," I said, with a little warmth. "You go too fast. Let me tell you first, that, for my honour, I take care of it myself; and, secondly, for your master, I do not allow even my own to meddle with my household."

"But, my lord," he said pompously, "the King of Spain—"

"Is the King of Spain," I answered, cutting him short without much ceremony. "But in the Arsenal of Paris, which, for the present, is my house, I am king. And I brook no usurpers, M. d'Evora."

He assented to that with a constrained smile.

"Then I can say no more," he answered. "I have warned you that the man is a rogue. If you will still entertain him, I wash my hands of it. But I fear the consequences, M. de Rosny, and, frankly, it lessens my opinion of your sagacity."

Thereat I bowed in my turn, and after the exchange of some civilities he took his leave. Considering his application after he was gone, I confess that I found nothing surprising in it; and had it come from a man whom I held in greater respect I might have complied with it in an indirect fashion. But though it might have led me under some circumstances to discard Diego, naturally, since it confirmed his story in some points, and proved besides that he was not a persona grata at the Spanish Embassy, it did not lead me to value him less. And as within the week he was so fortunate as to defeat La Varenne's champion in a great match at the Louvre, and won also a match, at M. de Montpensier's which put fifty crowns into my pocket, I thought less and less of d'Evora's remonstrance; until the king's return put it quite out of my head. The entanglement with Mademoiselle d'Entragues, which was destined to be the most fatal of all Henry's attachments, was then in the forming; and the king plunged into every kind of amusement with fresh zest. The very day after his return he matched his marker, a rogue, but an excellent player, against my man; and laid me twenty crowns on the event, the match to be played on the following Saturday after a dinner which M. de Lude was giving in honour of the lady.

On the Thursday, however, who should come in to me, while I was sitting alone after supper, but Maignan: who, closing the door and dismissing the page who waited there, told me with a very long face and an air of vast importance that he had discovered something.

"Something?" I said, being inclined at the moment to be merry. "What? A plot to reduce your perquisites, you rascal?"

"No, my lord," he answered stoutly. "But to tap your excellency's secrets."

"Indeed," I said pleasantly, not believing a word of it. "And who is to hang?"

"The Spaniard," he answered in a low voice.

That sobered me, by putting the matter in a new light; and I sat a moment looking at him and reviewing Diego's story, which assumed on the instant an aspect so uncommon and almost incredible that I wondered how I had ever allowed it to pass. But when I proceeded from this to the substance of Maignan's charge I found an IMPASSE in this direction also, and I smiled. "So it is Diego, is it?" I said. "You think that he is a spy?"

Maignan nodded.

"Then, tell me," I asked, "what opportunity has he of learning more than all the world knows? He has not been in my apartments since I engaged him. He has seen none of my papers. The youngest footboy could tell all he has learned."

"True, my lord," Maignan answered slowly; "but—"

"Well?"

"I saw him this evening, talking with a Priest in the Rue Petits Pois; and he calls himself a Protestant."

"Ah! You are sure that the man was a priest?"

"I know him."

"For whom?"

"One of the chaplains at the Spanish Embassy."

It was natural that after this I should take a more serious view of the matter; and I did so. But my former difficulty still remained, for, assuming this to be a cunning plot, and d'Evora's application to me a ruse to throw me off my guard, I could not see where their advantage lay; since the Spaniard's occupation was not of a nature to give him the entry to my confidence or the chance of ransacking my papers. I questioned Maignan further, therefore, but without result. He had seen the two together in a secret kind of way, viewing them himself from the window of a house where he had an assignation. He had not been near enough to hear what they said, but he was sure that no quarrel took place between them, and equally certain that it was no chance meeting that brought them together.

Infected by his assurance, I could still see no issue; and no object in such an intrigue. And in the end I contented myself with bidding him watch the Spaniard closely, and report to me the following evening; adding that he might confide the matter to La Trape, who was a supple fellow, and of the two the easier companion.

Accordingly, next evening Maignan again appeared, this time with a face even longer; so that at first I supposed him to have discovered a plot worse than Chastel's; but it turned out that he had discovered nothing. The Spaniard had spent the morning in lounging and the afternoon in practice at the Louvre, and from first to last had conducted himself in the most innocent manner possible. On this I rallied Maignan on his mare's nest, and was inclined to dismiss the matter as such; still, before doing so, I thought I would see La Trape, and dismissing Maignan I sent for him.

When he was come, "Well," I said, "have you anything to say?"

"One little thing only, your excellency," he answered slyly, "and of no importance."

"But you did not tell it to Maignan?"

"No, my Lord," he replied, his face relaxing in a cunning smile.

"Well?"

"Once to-day I saw Diego where he should not have been."

"Where?"

"In the King's dressing-room at the tennis-court."

"You saw him there?"

"I saw him coming out," he answered.

It may be imagined how I felt on hearing this; for although I might have thought nothing of the matter before my suspicions were aroused—since any man might visit such a place out of curiosity—now, my mind being disturbed, I was quick to conceive the worst, and saw with horror my beloved master already destroyed through my carelessness. I questioned La Trape in a fury, but could learn nothing more. He had seen the man slip out, and that was all.

"But did you not go in yourself?" I said, restraining my impatience with difficulty.

"Afterwards? Yes, my lord."

"And made no discovery?"

He shook his head.

"Was anything prepared for his Majesty?"

"There was sherbet; and some water."

"You tried them?"

La Trape grinned. "No, my lord," he said. "But I gave some to Maignan."

"Not explaining?"

"No, my lord."

"You sacrilegious rascal!" I cried, amused in spite of my anxiety. "And he was none the worse?"

"No, my lord."

Not satisfied yet, I continued to press him, but with so little success that I still found myself unable to decide whether the Spaniard had wandered in innocently or to explore his ground. In the end, therefore, I made up my mind to see things for myself; and early next morning, at an hour when I was not likely to be observed, I went out by a back door, and with my face muffled and no other attendance than Maignan and La Trape, went to the tennis-court and examined the dressing-room.

This was a small closet on the first floor, of a size to hold two or three persons, and with a casement through which the King, if he wished to be private, might watch the game. Its sole furniture consisted of a little table with a mirror, a seat for his Majesty, and a couple of stools, so that it offered small scope for investigation. True, the stale sherbet and the water were still there, the carafes standing on the table beside an empty comfit box, and a few toilet necessities; and it will be believed that I lost no time in examining them. But I made no discovery, and when I had passed my eye over everything else that the room contained, and noticed nothing that seemed in the slightest degree suspicious, I found myself completely at a loss. I went to the window, and for a moment looked idly into the court.

But neither did any light come thence, and I had turned again and was about to leave, when my eye lighted on a certain thing and I stopped.

"What is that?" I said. It was a thin case, book-shaped, of Genoa velvet, somewhat worn.

"Plaister," Maignan, who was waiting at the door, answered. "His Majesty's hand is not well yet, and as your excellency knows, he—"

"Silence, fool!" I cried, and I stood rooted to the spot, overwhelmed by the conviction that I held the clue to the mystery, and so shaken by the horror which that conviction naturally brought with it that I could not move a finger. A design so fiendish and monstrous as that which I suspected might rouse the dullest sensibilities, in a case where it threatened the meanest; but being aimed in this at the King, my master, from whom I had received so many benefits, and on whose life the well-being of all depended, it goaded me to the warmest resentment. I looked round the tennis-court—which, empty, shadowy and silent, seemed a fit place for such horrors—with rage and repulsion; apprehending in a moment of sad presage all the accursed strokes of an enemy whom nothing could propitiate, and who, sooner or later, must set all my care at naught, and take from France her greatest benefactor.

But, it will be said, I had no proof, only a conjecture; and this is true, but of it hereafter. Suffice it that, as soon as I had swallowed my indignation, I took all the precautions affection could suggest or duty enjoin, omitting nothing; and then, confiding the matter to no one the two men who were with me excepted—I prepared to observe the issue with gloomy satisfaction.

The match was to take place at three in the afternoon. A little after that hour, I arrived at the tennis-court, attended by La Font and other gentlemen, and M. l'Huillier, the councillor, who had dined with me. L'Huillier's business had detained me somewhat, and the men had begun; but as I had anticipated this, I had begged my good friend De Vic to have an eye to my interests. The King, who was in the gallery, had with him M. de Montpensier, the Comte de Lude, Vitry, Varennes, and the Florentine Ambassador, with Sancy and some others. Mademoiselle d'Entragues and two ladies had taken possession of his closet, and from the casement were pouring forth a perpetual fire of badinage and BONS MOTS. The tennis-court, in a word, presented as different an aspect as possible from that which it had worn in the morning. The sharp crack of the ball, as it bounded from side to side, was almost lost in the crisp laughter and babel of voices; which as I entered rose into a perfect uproar, Mademoiselle having just flung a whole lapful of roses across the court in return for some witticism. These falling short of the gallery had lighted on the head of the astonished Diego, causing a temporary cessation of play, during which I took my seat.

Madame de Lude's saucy eye picked me out in a moment. "Oh, the grave man!" she cried. "Crown him, too, with roses."

"As they crowned the skull at the feast, madame?" I answered, saluting her gallantly.

"No, but as the man whom the King delighteth to honour," she answered, making a face at

me. "Ha! ha! I am not afraid! I am not afraid! I am not afraid!"

There was a good deal of laughter at this. "What shall I do to her, M. de Rosny?" Mademoiselle cried out, coming to my rescue.

"If you will have the goodness to kiss her, mademoiselle," I answered, "I will consider it an advance, and as one of the council of the King's finances, my credit should be good for the re—"

"Thank you!" the King cried, nimbly cutting me short. "But as my finances seem to be the security, faith, I will see to the repayment myself! Let them start again; but I am afraid that my twenty crowns are yours, Grand Master; your man is in fine play."

I looked into the court. Diego, lithe and sinewy, with his cropped black hair, high colour, and quick shallow eyes, bounded here and there, swift and active as a panther. Seeing him thus, with his heart in his returns, I could not but doubt; more, as the game proceeded, amid the laughter and jests and witty sallies of the courtiers, I felt the doubt grow; the riddle became each minute more abstruse, the man more mysterious. But that was of no moment now.

A little after four o'clock the match ended in my favour; on which the King, tired of inaction, sprang up, and declaring that he would try Diego's strength himself, entered the court. I followed, with Vitry and others, and several strokes which had been made were tested and discussed. Presently, the King going to talk with Mademoiselle at her window, I remarked the Spaniard and Maignan, with the King's marker, and one or two others waiting at the further door. Almost at the same moment I observed a sudden movement among them, and voices raised higher than was decent, and I called out sharply to know what it was.

"An accident, my lord," one of the men answered respectfully.

"It is nothing," another muttered. "Maignan was playing tricks, your excellency, and cut Diego's hand a little; that is all."

"Cut his hand now!" I exclaimed angrily "And the King about to play with him. Let me see it!"

Diego sulkily held up his hand, and I saw a cut, ugly but of no importance.

"Pooh!" I said; "it is nothing. Get some plaister. Here, you," I continued wrathfully, turning to Maignan, "since you have done the mischief, booby, you must repair it. Get some plaister, do you hear? He cannot play in that state."

Diego muttered something, and Maignan that he had not got any; but before I could answer that he must get some, La Trape thrust his way to the front, and producing a small piece from his pocket, proceeded with a droll air of extreme carefulness to treat the hand. The other knaves fell into the joke, and the Spaniard had no option but to submit; though his scowling face showed that he bore Maignan no good-will, and that but for my presence he might not have been so complaisant. La Trape was bringing his surgery to an end by demanding a fee, in the most comical manner possible, when the King returned to our part of the court. "What is it?" he said. "Is anything the matter?"

"No, sire," I said. "My man has cut his hand a little, but it is nothing."

"Can he play?" Henry asked with his accustomed good-nature.

"Oh, yes, sire," I answered. "I have bound it up with a strip of plaister from the case in your Majesty's closet."

"He has not lost blood?"

"No, sire."

And he had not. But it was small wonder that the King asked; small wonder, for the man's face had changed in the last ten seconds to a strange leaden colour; a terror like that of a wild beast that sees itself trapped had leapt into his eyes. He shot a furtive glance round him, and I saw him slide his hand behind him. But I was prepared for that, and as the King moved off a space I slipped to the man's side, as if to give him some directions about his game.

"Listen," I said, in a voice heard only by him; "take the dressing off your hand, and I have you broken on the wheel. You understand? Now play."

Assuring myself that he did understand, and that Maignan and La Trape were at hand if he should attempt anything, I went back to my place, and sitting down by De Vic began to watch that strange game; while Mademoiselle's laughter and Madame de Lude's gibes floated across the court, and mingled with the eager applause and more dexterous criticisms of the courtiers. The light was beginning to sink, and for this reason, perhaps, no one perceived the Spaniard's pallor; but De Vic, after a rally or two, remarked that he was not playing his full strength.

"Wise man!" he added.

"Yes," I said. "Who plays well against kings plays ill."

De Vic laughed. "How he sweats!" he said, "and he never turned a hair when he played Colet. I suppose he is nervous."

"Probably," I said.

And so they chattered and laughed—chattered and laughed, seeing an ordinary game between the King and a marker; while I, for whom the court had grown sombre as a dungeon, saw a villain struggling in his own toils, livid with the fear of death, and tortured by horrible apprehensions. Use and habit were still so powerful with the man that he played on mechanically with his hands, but his eyes every now and then sought mine with the look of the trapped beast; and on these occasions I could see his lips move in prayer or cursing. The sweat poured down his face as he moved to and fro, and I, fancied that his features were beginning to twitch. Presently—I have said that the light was failing, so that it was not in my imagination only that the court was sombre—the King held his ball. "My friend, your man is not well," he said, turning to me.

"It is nothing, sire; the honour you do him makes him nervous," I answered. "Play up, sirrah," I continued; "you make too good a courtier."

Mademoiselle d'Entragues clapped her hands and laughed at the hit; and I saw Diego glare at her with an indescribable look, in which hatred and despair and a horror of reproach were so nicely mingled with something as exceptional as his position, that the whole baffled words. Doubtless the gibes and laughter he heard, the trifling that went on round him, the very game in which he was engaged, and from which he dared not draw back, seemed in his eyes the most appalling mockery; but ignorant who were in the secret, unable to guess how his diabolical plot had been discovered, uncertain even whether the whole were not a concerted piece, he went on playing his part mechanically; with starting eyes and labouring chest, and lips that, twitching and working, lost colour each minute. At length he missed a stroke, and staggering leaned against the wall, his face livid and ghastly. The King took the alarm at that, and cried out that something was wrong. Those who were sitting rose. I nodded to Maignan to go to the man.

"It is a fit," I said. "He is subject to them, and doubtless the excitement—but I am sorry that it has spoiled your Majesty's game."

"It has not," Henry answered kindly. "The light is gone. But have him looked to, will you, my friend? If La Riviere were here he might do something for him."

While he spoke, the servants had gathered round the man, but with the timidity which characterises that class in such emergencies, they would not touch him. As I crossed the court, and they made way for me, the Spaniard, who was still standing, though in a strange and distorted fashion, turned his bloodshot eyes on me.

"A priest!" he muttered, framing the words with difficulty, "a priest!"

I directed Maignan to fetch one. "And do you," I continued to the other servants, "take him into a room somewhere."

They obeyed, reluctantly. As they carried him out, the King, content with my statement, was giving his hand to Mademoiselle to descend the stairs; and neither he nor any, save the two men in my confidence, had the slightest suspicion that aught was the matter beyond a natural illness. But I shuddered when I considered how narrow had been the King's escape, how trifling the circumstance which had led to suspicion, how fortuitous the inspiration by which I had chanced on discovery. The delay of a single day, the occurrence of the slightest mishap, might have been fatal not to him only but to the best interests of France; which his death at a time when he was still childless must have plunged into the most melancholy of wars.

Of the wretched Spaniard I need say little more. Caught in his own snare, he was no sooner withdrawn from the court than he fell into violent convulsions, which held him until midnight when he died with symptoms and under circumstances so nearly resembling those which had attended the death of Madame de Beaufort at Easter, that I have several times dwelt on the strange coincidence, and striven to find the connecting link. But I never hit on it; and the King's death, and that unexplained tendency to imitate great crimes under which the vulgar labour, prevailed with me to keep the matter secret. Nay, as I believed that d'Evora had played the part of an unconscious tool, and as a hint pressed home sufficed to procure the withdrawal of the chaplain whom Maignan had named, I did not think it necessary to disclose the matter even to the King my master.

III.

TWO MAYORS OF BOTTITORT.

Believing that I have now set down all those particulars of the treaty with Epernon and the consequent pacification of Brittany in the year 1598 which it will be of advantage to the public to know, that it may the better distinguish in the future those who have selfishly impoverished the State from those who, in its behalf, have incurred obloquy and high looks, I proceed next to the events which followed the King's return to Paris.

But, first, and by way of sampling the diverting episodes that will occur from time to time in the most laborious existence, and for the moment reduce the minister to the level of the man, I am tempted to narrate an adventure that befell me on my return, between Rennes and Vitre; when the King having preceded me at speed under the pretext of urgency, but really that he might avoid the prolix addresses that awaited him in every town, I found myself no more minded to suffer. Having sacrificed my ease, therefore, in two of the more important places, and come within as many stages of Vitre, I determined also on a holiday. Accordingly, directing my baggage and the numerous escort and suite that attended me to the full tale of four-score horses—to keep the high road, I struck myself into a byway, intending to seek hospitality for the night at a house of M. de Laval's; and on the second evening to render myself with a good grace to the eulogia and tedious mercies of the Vitre townfolk.

I kept with me only La Font and two servants. The day was fine, and the air brisk; the country open, affording many distant prospects which the sun rendered cheerful. We rode for some time, therefore, with the gaiety of schoolboys released from their tasks, and dining at noon in the lee of one of the great boulders that there dot the plain, took pleasure in applying to the life of courts every evil epithet that came to mind. For a little time afterwards we rode as cheerfully; but about three in the afternoon the sky became overcast, and almost at the same moment we discovered that we had strayed from the track. The country in that district resembles the more western parts of Brittany, in consisting of huge tracts of bog and moorland strewn with rocks and covered with gorse; which present a cheerful aspect in sunshine, but are savage and barren to a degree when viewed through sheets of rain or under a sombre sky.

The position, therefore, was not without its discomforts. I had taken care to choose a servant who was familiar with the country, but his knowledge seemed now at fault. However, under his direction we retraced our steps, but still without regaining the road; and as a small rain presently began to fall and the day to decline, the landscape which in the morning had flaunted a wild and rugged beauty, changed to a brown and dreary waste set here and there with ghost-like stones. Once astray on this, we found our path beset with sloughs and morasses; among which we saw every prospect of passing the night, when La Font espied at a little distance a wind-swept wood that, clothing a low shoulder of the moor, promised at least a change and shelter. We made towards it, and discovered not only all that we had expected to see, but a path and a guide.

The latter was as much surprised to see us as we to see her, for when we came upon her she was sitting on the bank beside the path weeping bitterly. On hearing us, however, she sprang up and discovered the form of a young girl, bare-foot and bareheaded, wearing only a short ragged frock of homespun. Nevertheless, her face was neither stupid nor uncomely; and though, at the first alarm, supposing us to be either robbers or hobgoblins—of which last the people of that country are peculiarly fearful—she made as if she would escape across the moor, she stopped as soon as she heard my voice. I asked her gently where we were.

At first she did not understand, but the servant who had played the guide so ill, speaking to her in the PATOIS of the country, she answered that we were near St. Brieuc, a hamlet not far from Bottitort, and considerably off our road. Asked how far it was to Bottitort, she answered—between two and three leagues, and an indifferent road.

We could ride the distance in a couple of hours, and there remained almost as much daylight. But the horses were tired, so, resigning myself to the prospect of some discomfort, I asked her if there was an inn at St. Brieuc.

"A poor place for your honours," she answered, staring at us in innocent wonder, the forgotten tears not dry on her cheeks.

"Never mind; take us to it," I answered.

She turned at the word and tripped on before us. I bade the servant ask her, as we went, why she had been crying, and learned through him that she had been to her uncle's two leagues away to borrow money for her mother; that the uncle would not lend it, and that now they would be turned out of their house; that her father was lately dead, and that her mother kept the inn, and owed the money for meal and cider.

"At least, she says that she does not owe it," the man corrected himself, "for her father paid as usual at Corpus Christi; but after his death M. Grabot said that he had not paid, and—"

"M. Grabot?" I said. "Who is he?"

"The Mayor of Bottitort."

"The creditor?"

"Yes."

"And how much is owing?" I asked.

"Nothing, she says."

"But how much does he say?"

"Twenty crowns."

Doubtless some will view my conduct on this occasion with surprise; and wonder why I troubled myself with inquiries so minute upon a matter so mean. But these do not consider that ministers are the King's eyes; and that in a State no class is so unimportant that it can be safely overlooked. Moreover, as the settlement of the finances was one of the objects of my stay in those parts—and I seldom had the opportunity of checking the statements made to me by the farmers and lessees of the taxes, the receivers, gatherers, and, in a word, all the corrupt class that imparts such views of a province as suit its interests—I was glad to learn anything that threw light on the real condition of the country: the more, as I had to receive at Vitre a deputation of the notables and officials of the district.

Accordingly, I continued to put questions to her until, crossing a ridge, we came at last within sight of the inn, a lonely house of stone, standing in the hollow of the moor and sheltered on one side by a few gnarled trees that took off in a degree from the bleakness of its aspect. The house was of one story only, with a window on either side of the door, and no other appeared in sight; but a little smoke rising from the chimney seemed to promise a better reception than the desolate landscape and the girl's scanty dress had led us to expect.

As we drew nearer, however, a thing happened so remarkable as to draw our attention in a moment from all these points, and bring us, gaping, to a standstill. The shutters of the two windows were suddenly closed before our eyes with a clap that came sharply on the wind. Then, in a twinkling, one window flew open again and a man, seemingly naked, bounded from it, fled with inconceivable rapidity across the front of the house and vanished through the other window, which opened to receive him. He had scarcely gained that shelter before a coal-black figure followed him, leaping out of the one window and in at the other with the same astonishing swiftness—a swiftness which was so great that before any of us could utter more than an exclamation, the two figures appeared again round the corner of the house, in the same order, but this time with so small an interval that the fugitive barely saved himself through the window. Once more, while we stared in stupefaction, they flashed out and in; and this time it seemed to me that as they vanished the black spectre seized its victim.

When I say that all this time the two figures uttered no sound, that there was no other living being in sight, and that on every side of the solitary house the moor, growing each minute more eerie as the day waned, spread to the horizon, the more superstitious among us may be pardoned if they gave way to their fears. La Font was the first to speak.

"MON DIEU!" he cried—while the girl moaned in terror, the Breton crossed himself, and La Trape looked uncomfortable—"the place is bewitched!"

"Nonsense!" I said. "Who is in the house, girl?"

"Only my mother," she wailed. "Oh, my poor mother!"

I silenced her, scolding them all for fools, and her first; and La Font, recovering himself, did the same. But this was the year of that strange appearance of the spectre horseman at Fontainebleau of which so much has been said; and my servants, when we had approached the house a little nearer, and it still remained silent and, as it were, dead to the eye, would go no farther, but stood in sheer terror and permitted me to go on alone with La Font. I confess that the loneliness of the house, and the dreary waste that surrounded it (which seemed to exclude the idea of trickery) were not without their effect on my spirits; and that as I dismounted and approached the door, I felt a kind of chill not remarkable under the circumstances.

But the courage of the gentleman differs from that of the vulgar in that he fears yet goes; and I lifted the latch, and entered boldly. The scene which met my eyes inside was sufficiently commonplace to reassure me. At the farther end of a long bare room, draughty, half-lighted, and having an earthen floor, yet possessing that air of homeliness which a wood fire never fails to impart, sat a single traveller; who had drawn his small table under the open chimney, and there, with his feet almost in the fire, was partaking of a poor meal of black bread and onions. He was a tall, spare man, with sloping shoulders and a long sour face, of which, as I entered, he gave me the full benefit.

I looked round the room, but look as I might I could see no one else, nor anything that explained what we had witnessed and I accosted the man civilly, wishing him good evening. He made an answer, but indistinctly, and, this done, went on with his meal like one who viewed our arrival with little pleasure; while I, puzzled and astonished by the ordinary look of things and the stillness of the house, affected to warm my feet at the logs. At length, espying no signs of disturbance anywhere, I asked him if he was alone.

"I was, sir," he answered gravely.

I was going on to tell him, though reluctantly, what we had seen outside, and to question him upon it, when on a sudden, before I could speak again, he leaned towards me and accosted me with startling abruptness. "Sir," he said, "I should like to have your opinion of Louis Eleven."

I stared at him in the most perfect astonishment; and was for a moment so completely taken aback that I mechanically repeated his words. For answer, he did so also.

"The Eleventh Louis?" I said.

"Yes," he rejoined, turning his pale visage full upon me. "What is your opinion of him, sir? He was a man?"

"Well," I said, shrugging my shoulders, "I take that for granted." I began to think that the traveller was demented.

"And a king?"

"Yes, I suppose so," I answered contemptuously. "I never heard it doubted."

He leaned towards me, and spoke with the most eager impressiveness. "A man—and a king!" he said. "Yet neither a manly king, nor a kingly man! You take me?"

"Yes," I said impatiently. "I see what you mean."

"Neither a kingly man, nor a manly king!" he repeated with solemn gusto. "You take me clearly, I think?"

I had no stomach for further fooleries, and I was about to answer him with some sharpness—though I could not for the life of me tell whether he was mad or an eccentric when a harsh voice shrieked in my ear, "Bob!" and in a twinkling a red figure appeared bounding and whirling in the middle of the kitchen; now springing into the air until its head touched the rafters, now eddying round and round the floor in the giddiest gyrations. At the first glance, startled by the voice in my ear, I recoiled; but a second disclosing what it was, and the secret of our alarm outside, I masked my movement; and when the man brought his performance to a sudden stop, and falling on one knee in an attitude of exaggerated respect held out his cap, I was ready for him.

"Why, you knave," I said, "you should be whipped, not rewarded. Who gave you leave to play pranks on travellers?"

He looked at me with a droll smile on his round merry face, which at its gravest was a thing to laugh at. "Let him whip who is scared," he said, with roguish impudence. "Or if there is to be whipping, my lord, whip Louis XI."

Thus reminded, I turned to the solemn traveller; but my eyes had no sooner met his than he twisted his visage into so wry a smile—if smile it could be called—that wherever there was a horse collar he must have won the prize. To hide my amusement, I asked them what they were. "Mountebanks?" I said curtly.

"Your lordship has pricked the garter offhand," the merry man answered cheerfully. "You see before you the renowned Pierre Paladin VOILA!—and Philibert Le Grand! of the Breton fairs, monsieur."

"But why this foolery—here?" I said.

"We took you for another, monsieur," he answered.

"Whom you intended to frighten?"

"Precisely, your grace."

"Well, you are nice rogues," I said, looking at him.

"So is he," he answered, undaunted.

I left the matter there for a moment, while I summoned La Font and the servants; whose rage, when, entering a-tiptoe and with some misgiving, they discovered how they had been deceived, and by whom, was scarcely to be restrained even by my presence. However, aided by Philibert's comicalities, I presently secured a truce, and the two strollers vacating in my honour the table by the fire—though they had not the slightest notion who I was we were soon on terms. I had taken the precaution to bring a meal with me, and while La Trape and his companion unpacked it, and I dried my riding boots, I asked the players who it was they had meant to frighten.

They were not very willing to tell me, but at length confessed, to my astonishment, that it was M. Grabot.

"Grabot—Grabot!" I said, striving to recollect where I had heard the name. "The Mayor of Bottitort?"

The solemn man made an atrocious grimace. Then, "Yes, monsieur, the Mayor of Bottitort," he said frankly. "A year ago he put Philibert in the stocks for a riddle; that is his affair. And the woman of this house has more than once befriended me, and he is for turning her out for a debt she does not owe; and that is my affair. However, your lordship's arrival has saved him for this time."

"You expected him here this evening, then?"

"He is coming," he answered, with more than his usual gloom. "He passed this way this morning, and announced that on his return he should spend the night here. We found the goodwife all of a tremble when we arrived. He is a hard man, monsieur," the mountebank continued bitterly. "She cried after him that she hoped that God would change his heart, but he only answered that even if St. Brieuc changed his body—you know the legend, monseigneur, doubtless—he should be here."

"And here he is," the other, who had been looking out of one of the windows, cried. "I see his lantern coming down the hill. And by St. Brieuc, I have it! I have it," the droll continued, suddenly spinning round in a wild dance of triumph on the floor, and then as suddenly stopping and falling into an attitude before us. "Monsieur, if you will help us, I have the richest jest ever played. Pierre, listen. You, gentlemen all, listen! We will pretend that he is changed. He is a pompous man; he thinks the Mayor of Bottitort equal to the Saint Pere. Well, Pierre shall be M. Grabot, Mayor of Bottitort. You, monsieur, that we may give him enough of mayors, shall be the Mayor of Gol, and I will be the Mayor of St. Just. This gentleman shall swear to us, so shall the servants. For him, he does not exist. Oh, we will punish him finely."

"But," I said, astounded by the very audacity of the rogue's proposition, "you do not flatter yourself that you will deceive him?"

"We shall, monsieur, if you will help," he answered confidently. "I will be warrant for it we shall."

The thing had little of dignity in it, and I wonder now that I complied; but I have always shared with the King, my master, a taste for drolleries of the kind suggested; while nothing that I had as yet heard of this Grabot was of a nature to induce me to spare him. Seeing that La Font was tickled with the idea, and that the servants were a-grin, and the more eager to trick others as they had just been tricked themselves, I was tempted to consent.

After this, the preparations took not a minute. Philibert covered his fool's clothes with a cloak, and their table was drawn nearer to the fire, so as, with mine, to take up the whole hearth. La Trape fell into an attitude behind me; and the Breton, adopting a refinement suggested at the last moment, was sent out to intercept Grabot before he entered, and tell him that the inn was full, and that he had better pass on.

The knave did his business so well that Grabot, being just such a man as the stroller had described to us, the altercation on the threshold was of itself the most amusing thing in the world. "Who?" we heard a loud, coarse voice exclaim. "Who d'ye say are here, man?"

"The Mayor of Bottitort."

"MILLE DIABLES!"

"The Mayor of Bottitort and the Mayors of Gol and St. Just," the servant repeated as if he noticed nothing amiss.

"That is a lie!" the new comer replied, with a snort of triumph, "and an impudent one. But you have got the wrong sow by the ear this time."

"Why, man," a third voice, somewhat nasal and rustical, struck in, "don't you know the Mayor of Bottitort?"

"I should," my Breton answered bluntly, and making, as we guessed, a stand before them. "For I am his servant, and he is this moment at his meat."

"The Mayor of Bottitort?"

"Yes."

"M. Grabot?"

"Yes."

"And you are his servant?"

"I have thought so for some time," the Breton answered contemptuously.

The Mayor fairly roared in his indignation. "You—his servant! The Mayor of Bottitort's?" he cried in a voice of thunder. "I'll tell you what you are; you are a liar!—a liar, man, that is what you are! Why, you fool, I am the Mayor of Bottitort myself. Now, do you see how you have wasted

yourself? Out of my way! Jehan, follow me in. I shall look into this. There is some knavery here, but if Simon Grabot cannot get to the bottom of it the Mayor of Bottitort will. Follow me, I say. My servant indeed? Come, come!"

And, still grumbling, he flung open the door, which the Breton had left ajar, and stalked in upon us, fuming and blowing out his cheeks for all the world like a bantam cock with its feathers erect. He was a short, puffy man; with a short nose, a wide face, and small eyes. But had he been Caesar and Alexander rolled into one, he could not have crossed the threshold with a more tremendous assumption of dignity. Once inside, he stood and glared at us, somewhat taken aback, I think, for the moment by our numbers; but recovering himself almost immediately, he strutted towards us, and, without uncovering or saluting us, he asked in a deep voice who was responsible for the man outside.

"I am," the graver mountebank answered, looking at the stranger with a sober air of surprise. "He is my servant."

"Ah!" the Mayor exclaimed, with a withering glance. "And who, may I ask, are you?"

"You may ask, certainly," the player answered drily. "But until you take off your hat I shall not answer."

The Mayor gasped at this rebuff, and turned, if it were possible, a shade redder; but he uncovered.

"Now I do not mind telling you," Pierre continued, with a mild dignity admirably assumed, "that I am Simon Grabot, and have the honour to be Mayor of Bottitort."

"You!"

"Yes, monsieur, I; though perhaps unworthy."

I looked to see an explosion, but the Mayor was too far gone. "Why, you swindling impostor," he said, with something that was almost admiration in his tone. "You are the very prince of cheats! The king of cozeners! But for all that, let me tell you, you have chosen the wrong ROLE this time. For I—I, sir, am the Mayor of Bottitort, the very man whose name you have taken!"

Pierre stared at him in composed silence, which his comrade was the first to break. "Is he mad?" he said in a low voice.

The grave man shook his head.

The Mayor heard and saw; and getting no other answer, began to tremble between passion and a natural, though ill-defined, misgiving, which the silent gaze of so large a party—for we all looked at him compassionately—was well calculated to produce. "Mad?" he cried. "No, but some one is, Sir," he continued, turning to La Font with a gesture in which appeal and impatience were curiously blended, "Do you know this man?"

"M. Grabot? Certainly," he answered, without blushing. "And have these ten years."

"And you say that he is M. Grabot?" the poor Mayor retorted, his jaw falling ludicrously.

"Certainly. Who should he be?"

The Mayor looked round him, sudden beads of sweat on his brow. "MON DIEU!" he cried. "You are all in it. Here, you, do you know this person?"

La Trape, to whom he addressed himself, shrugged his shoulders. "I should," he said. "The Mayor is pretty well known about here."

"The Mayor?"

"Ay."

"But I am the Mayor—I," Grabot answered eagerly, tapping himself on the breast in the most absurd manner. "Don't you know me, my friend?"

"I never saw you before, to my knowledge," the rascal answered contemptuously; "and I know this country pretty well. I should think that you have been crossing St. Brieu's brook, and forgotten to say your—"

"Hush!" the stout player interposed with some sharpness. "Let him alone. LE BON DIEU knows that such a thing may happen to the best of us."

The Mayor clapped his hand to his head. "Sir," he said almost humbly, addressing the last speaker, "I seem to know your voice. Your name, if you please?"

"Fracasse," he answered pleasantly. "I am Mayor of Gol."

"You—Fracasse, Mayor of Gol?" Grabot exclaimed between rage and terror. "But Fracasse is

a tall man. I know him as well as I know my brother."

The pseudo-Fracasse smiled, but did not contradict him.

The Mayor wiped the moisture from his brow. He had all the characteristics of an obstinate man; but if there is one thing which I have found in a long career more true than another, it is that no one can resist the statements of his fellows. So much, I verily believe, is this the case, that if ten men maintain black to be white, the eleventh will presently be brought into their opinion. Besides, the Mayor had a currish side. He looked piteously from one to another of us, his cheeks seemed to grow in a moment pale and flabby, and he was on the point of whimpering, when at the last moment he bethought him of his servant, and turned to him in a spurt of sudden thankfulness. "Why, Jehan, man, I had forgotten you," he said. "Are these men mad, or am I?"

But Jehan, a simple rustic, was in a state of ludicrous bewilderment. "Dol, master, I don't know," he stuttered, rubbing his head.

"But I am myself," the Mayor cried, in a most ridiculous tone of remonstrance.

"Dol, and I don't know," the man whimpered. "I do believe that there is a change in you. I never saw you look the like before. And I never said any PATER either. Holy saints!" the poor fool continued piteously, "I wish I were at home. And there, for all I know, my wife has got another man."

He began to blubber at this; which to us was the most ludicrous thought, so that it was all we could do to restrain our laughter. But the Mayor saw things in another light. Shaken by our steady persistence in our story, and astounded by our want of respect, the defection of his follower utterly cowed him. After staring wildly about him for a moment, he fairly turned tail, and sat down on an old box by the door, where with his hands on his knees, he looked out before him with such an expression of chap-fallen bewilderment as nearly discovered our plot by throwing us into fits of laughter.

Still he was not persuaded; for, from time to time, he roused himself, and lifting his head cast suspicious glances at our party. But the two strollers, who were now in their element, played their parts with so much craft and delicacy, and with such an infinity of humour besides, that everything he overheard plunged him deeper in the slough. They knew something of local affairs, and called one another Mayor very naturally; and mentioning their wives, let drop other scraps of information that, catching his ear, made the wretched man every now and then sit up as if a wasp had stung him. One story in particular which the false Mayor told—and which, it appeared, was to the knowledge of all the country round the real Mayor's stock anecdote—had an absurd effect upon him. He straightened himself, listened as if his life depended upon it, and when he heard the well-known ending, uttered, doubtless, in something of his old tone, he collapsed into himself like a man who had no longer faith in anything.

Presently, however, an effort of common-sense would again disperse the fog. He would raise his head, his eye grow bright, something of his old pugnacity would come back to him. He would appear—this more than once—to be on the point of rising to challenge us. But these occasions were as skilfully met as they were easily detected; and as the rogues had invariably some stroke in reserve that in a twinkling flung him back into his old state of dazed bewilderment, while it well-nigh killed us with stifled mirth, they only gave ever new point to the jest.

This, to be brief, was carried on until I retired; and probably the two strollers would have kept it up longer if the ludicrous doubt whether he was himself, which they had lodged in the Mayor's mind, had not at last spurred him to action. An hour before midnight, feeling it rankle intolerably, I suppose, he sprang up on a sudden, dragged the door open, darted out with the air of a madman, and in a moment was lost in the darkness of the moor.

When I rose in the morning, therefore, I found him gone, the strollers looking glum, and the good-wife and her girl between tears and reproaches. I could not but feel, on my part, that I had somewhat stooped in the night's diversion; but before I had time to reflect much on that an unexpected trait in the strollers' conduct reconciled me to this odd experience. They proposed to leave when I did; but a little before the start they came to me, and set before me very ingenuously that the woman of the house might suffer through our jest; if I would help her therefore, they would subscribe two crowns so that she might have a substantial sum to offer on account of her debt. As I took this to be the greater part of their capital, and judged for other reasons that the offer was genuine, I received it in the best part, and found their good-nature no less pleasant than their foolery. I handed over three crowns for our share, and on that we parted; they set out with their bundles strapped to their backs, and I waited somewhat impatiently for La Trape and the Breton to bring round the horses.

Before these appeared, however, La Font, who was at the door, cried out that the two players were coming hack; and going to the window I saw with astonishment a whole troop, some mounted and some on foot, hurrying down the hill after them. For a moment I felt some alarm, supposing it to be a scheme of Epernon's to seize my person; and I cursed the imprudence which had led me to expose myself in this solitary place. But a second glance showing me that the Mayor of Bottitort was among the foremost, I repented almost as seriously of the unlucky trifling that had landed me in this foolish plight.

I even debated whether I should mount and, if it were possible, get clear before they arrived; but the rueful faces of the two players as they appeared breathless in the doorway, and the liking I had taken for the rascals, decided me to stand my ground "What is it?" I said.

"The Mayor, monsieur," Philibert answered, while Pierre pursed up his lips with gloomy gravity. "I fear it will not stop at the stocks this time," the rogue continued with a grimace.

His comrade muttered something about a rod and a fool's back; but M. Grabot's entrance cut his witticism short. The Mayor, between shame and rage, and the gratification of his revenge, was almost bursting, and the moment he caught sight of us opened fire. "All, M. de Gol; we have them all!" he cried exultingly. "Now they shall smart for it! Depend upon it, it is some deep-laid scheme of that party. I have said so."

But the Mayor of Gol, a stout, big, placid man, looked at us doubtfully. "Well," he said, "I know these two; they are strolling mountebanks, honest knaves enough but always in some mischief."

"What, strolling clowns?" M. Grabot rejoined, his face falling.

"Ay, and you may depend upon it it is some joke of theirs," his friend answered, his eyes twinkling. "I begin to think that you would have done better if you had waited a little before bringing M. le Comte into the matter."

"Ah, but there are these two," M. Grabot cried, as he recovered from the momentary panic into which the other's words had thrown him. "Depend upon it they are the chief movers. What else but treason could they mean by asserting that one of them was Mayor of Bottitort? By denying my title? By setting up other officers than those to whom his Gracious Majesty has delegated his authority?"

"Umph!" his brother Mayor said, "I don't know these gentlemen."

"No!" his companion cried in triumph. "But I intend to know them; and to know a good deal about them. Guard the window there," he continued fussily. "Where is my clerk? Is M. de Laval coming?"

Two or three cried obsequiously that he had crossed the hill; and would arrive immediately.

Hearing this, and thinking it more becoming not to enter into an altercation, I kept my seat and the scornful silence I had hitherto maintained. The two Mayors had brought with them a posse of busybodies—huissiers, constables, tip-staves, and the like; and these all gaped upon us as if they saw before them the most notable traitors of the age. The women of the house wept in a corner, and the strollers shrugged their shoulders and strove to appear at their ease. But the only person who felt the indifference which they assumed was La Font; who, obnoxious to none of the annoyances which I foresaw, could hardly restrain his mirth at the DENOUEMENT which he anticipated.

Meanwhile the Mayor, foreseeing a very different issue, stood blowing out his cheeks and fixing us with his little eyes with an expression of dignity that would have pleased me vastly if I had been free to enjoy it. But the reflection that Laval's presence, which would cut the knot of our difficulties, would also place me at the mercy of his wit, did not enable me to contemplate it with entire indifference.

By-and-by we heard him dismount, and a moment later he came in with a gentleman and two or three armed servants. He did not at once see me, but as the crowd made way for him he addressed himself sharply to M. Grabot. "Well, have you got them?" he said.

"Certainly, M. le Comte."

"Oh! very well. Now for the particulars, then. You must state your charge quickly, for I have to be in Vitre to-day."

"He alleged that he had been appointed Mayor of Bottitort," Grabot answered pompously.

"Umph! I don't know?" M. de Laval muttered, looking round with a frown of discontent. "I hope that you have not brought me hither on a fool's errand. Which one?"

"That one," the Mayor said, pointing to the solemn man, whose gravity and depression were now something preternatural.

"Oh!" M. de Laval grumbled. "But that is not all, I suppose. What of the others?"

M. Grabot pointed to me. "That one," he said—

He got no farther; for M. de Laval, springing forward, seized my hand and saluted me warmly. "Why, your excellency," he cried, in a tone of boundless surprise, "what are you doing in this GALERE! All last evening I waited for you, at my house, and now—"

"Here I am," I answered jocularly, "in charge it seems, M. le Comte!"

"MON DIEU!" he cried. "I don't understand it!"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Don't ask me," I said. "Perhaps your friend the Mayor call tell you."

"But, Monsieur, I do not understand," the Mayor answered piteously, his mouth agape with horror, his fat cheeks turning in a moment all colours. "This gentleman, whom you seem to know, Monsieur le Comte—"

"Is the Marquis de Rosny, President of the Council, blockhead!" Laval cried irately. "You madman! you idiot!" he continued, as light broke in upon him, and he saw that it was indeed on a fool's errand that he had been roused so early. "Is this your conspiracy? Have you dared to bring me here—"

But I thought that it was time to interfere. "The truth is," I said, "that M. Grabot here is not so much to blame. He was the victim of a trick which these rascals played on him; and in an idle moment I let it go on. That is the whole secret. However, I forgive him for his officiousness since it brings us together, and I shall now have the pleasure of your company to Vitre."

Laval assented heartily to this, and I did not think fit to tell him more, nor did he inquire; the Mayor's stupidity passing current for all. For M. Grabot himself, I think that I never saw a man more completely confounded. He stood staring with his mouth open; and, as much deserted as the statesman who has fallen from office, had not the least credit even with his own sycophants, who to a man deserted him and flocked about the Mayor of Gol. Though I had no reason to pity him, and, indeed, thought him well punished, I took the opportunity of saying a word to him before I mounted; which, though it was only a hint that he should deal gently with the woman of the house, was received with servility equal to the arrogance he had before displayed; and I doubt not it had all the effect I desired. For the strollers, I did not forget them, but bade them hasten to Vitre, where I would see a performance. They did so, and hitting the fancy of Zamet, who chanced to be still there, and who thought that he saw profit in them, they came on his invitation to Paris, where they took the Court by storm. So that an episode trifling in itself, and such as on my part requires some apology, had for them consequences of no little importance.

IV.

LA TOUSSAINT.

Towards the autumn of 1601, when the affair of M. de Biron, which was so soon to fill the mouths of the vulgar, was already much in the minds of those whom the King honoured with his confidence, I was one day leaving the hall at the Arsenal, after giving audience to such as wished to see me, when Maignan came after me and detained me; reporting that a gentleman who had attended early, but had later gone into the garden, was still in waiting. While Maignan was still speaking the stranger himself came up, with some show of haste but none of embarrassment; and, in answer to my salutation and inquiry what I could do for him, handed me a letter. He had the air of a man not twenty, his dress was a trifle rustic; but his strong and handsome figure set off a face that would have been pleasing but for a something fierce in the aspect of his eyes. Assured that I did not know him, I broke the seal of his letter and found that it was from my old flame Madame de Bray, who, as Mademoiselle de St. Mesmin, had come so near to being my wife; as will be remembered by those who have read the early part of these memoirs.

The young man proved to be her brother, whom she commended to my good offices, the impoverishment of the family being so great that she could compass no more regular method of introducing him to the world, though the house of St. Mesmin is truly respectable and, like my own, allied to several of the first consequence. Madame de Bray recalled our old TENDRESSE to my mind, and conjured me so movingly by it—and by the regard which her family had always entertained for me—that I could not dismiss the application with the hundred others of like tenor that at that time came to me with each year. That I might do nothing in the dark, however, I invited the young fellow to walk with me in the garden, and divined, even before he spoke, from the absence of timidity in his manner, that he was something out of the common. "So you have come to Paris to make your fortune?" I said.

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"And what are the tools with which you propose to do it?" I continued, between jest and earnest.

"That letter, sir," he answered simply; "and, failing that, two horses, two suits of clothes, and two hundred crowns."

"You think that those will suffice?" I said, laughing.

"With this, sir," he answered, touching his sword; "and a good courage."

I could not but stand amazed at his coolness; for he spoke to me as simply as to a brother, and looked about him with as much or as little curiosity as Guise or Montpensier. It was evident that he thought a St. Mesmin equal to any man under the King; and that of all the St. Mesmins he did not value himself least.

"Well," I said, after considering him, "I do not think that I can help you much immediately. I should be glad to know, however, what plans you have formed for yourself."

"Frankly, sir," he said, "I thought of this as I travelled; and I decided that fortune can be won by three things—by gold, by steel, and by love. The first I have not, and for the last I have a better use. Only the second is left. I shall be Crillon."

I looked at him in astonishment; for the assurance of his manner exceeded that of his words. But I did not betray the feeling. "Crillon was one in a million," I said drily.

"So am I," he answered.

I confess that the audacity of this reply silenced me. I reflected that the young man who—brought up in the depths of the country, and without experience, training or fashion—could so speak in the face of Paris was so far out of the common that I hesitated to dash his hopes in the contemptuous way which seemed most natural. I was content to remind him that Crillon had lived in times of continual war, whereas now we were at peace; and, bidding him come to me in a week, I hinted that in Paris his crowns would find more frequent opportunities of leaving his pockets than his sword its sheath.

He parted from me with this, seeming perfectly satisfied with his reception; and marched away with the port of a man who expected adventures at every corner, and was prepared to make the most of them. Apparently he did not take my hint greatly to heart, however; for when I next met him, within the week, he was fashionably dressed, his hair in the mode, and his company as noble as himself. I made him a sign to stop, and he came to speak to me.

"How many crowns are left?" I said jocularly.

"Fifty," he answered, with perfect readiness.

"What!" I said, pointing to his equipment with something of the indignation I felt, "has this cost the balance?"

"No," he answered. "On the contrary, I have paid three months' rent in advance and a month's board at Zaton's; I have added two suits to my wardrobe, and I have lost fifty crowns on the dice."

"You promise well!" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders quite in the fashionable manner. "Always courage!" he said; and he went on, smiling.

I was walking at the time with M. de Saintonge, and he muttered, with a sneer, that it was not difficult to see the end, or that within the year the young braggart would sink to be a gaming-house bully. I said nothing, but I confess that I thought otherwise; the lad's disposition of his money and his provision for the future seeming to me so remarkable as to set him above ordinary rules.

From this time I began to watch his career with interest, and I was not surprised when, in less than a month, something fell out that led the whole court to regard him with a mixture of amusement and expectancy.

One evening, after leaving the King's closet, I happened to pass through the east gallery at the Louvre, which served at that time as the outer antechamber, and was the common resort as well of all those idlers who, with some pretensions to fashion, lacked the ENTREE, as of many who with greater claims preferred to be at their ease. My passage for a moment stilled the babel which prevailed. But I had no sooner reached the farther door than the noise broke out again; and this with so sudden a fury, the tumult being augmented by the crashing fall of a table, as caused me at the last moment to stand and turn. A dozen voices crying simultaneously, "Have a care!" and "Not here! not here!" and all looking the same way, I was able to detect the three principals in the FRACAS. They were no other than M. de St. Mesmin, Barradas—a low fellow, still remembered, who was already what Saintonge had prophesied that the former would become—and young St. Germain, the eldest son of M. de Clan.

I rather guessed than heard the cause of the quarrel, and that St. Mesmin, putting into words what many had known for years and some made their advantage of, had accused Barradas of cheating. The latter's fury was, of course, proportioned to his guilt; an instant challenge while I looked was his natural answer. This, as he was a consummate swordsman, and had long earned his living as much by fear as by fraud, should have been enough to stay the greediest stomach; but St. Mesmin was not content. Treating the knave, the word once passed, as so much dirt, he

transferred his attack to St. Germain, and called on him to return the money he had won by betting on Barradas.

St. Germain, a young spark as proud and headstrong as St. Mesmin himself, and possessed of friends equal to his expectations, flung back a haughty refusal. He had the advantage in station and popularity; and by far the larger number of those present sided with him. I lingered a moment in curiosity, looking to see the accuser with all his boldness give way before the almost unanimous expression of disapproval. But my former judgment of him had been correctly formed; so far from being browbeaten or depressed by his position, he repeated the demand with a stubborn persistence that marvellously reminded me of Crillon; and continued to reiterate it until all, except St. Germain himself, were silent. "You must return my money!" he kept on saying monotonously. "You must return my money. This man cheated, and you won my money. You must pay or fight."

"With a dead man?" St. Germain replied, gibing at him.

"No, with me."

"Barradas will spit you!" The other scoffed. "Go and order your coffin, and do not trouble me."

"I shall trouble you. If you did not know that he cheated, pay; and if you did know, fight."

"I know?" St. Germain retorted fiercely. "You madman! Do you mean to say that I knew that he cheated?"

"I mean what I say!" St. Mesmin returned stolidly. "You have won my money. You must return it. If you will not return it, you must fight."

I should have heard more, but at that moment the main door opened, and two or three gentlemen who had been with the King came out. Not wishing to be seen watching the brawl, I moved away and descended the stairs; and Varenne overtaking me a moment later, and entering on the Biron affair—of which I had just been discussing the latest developments with the King—I forgot St. Mesmin for the time, and only recalled him next morning when Saintonge, being announced, came into my room in a state of great excitement, and almost with his first sentence brought out his name.

"Barradas has not killed him then?" I said, reproaching myself in a degree for my forgetfulness.

"No! He, Barradas!" Saintonge answered.

"No?" I exclaimed.

"Yes!" he said. "I tell you, M. le Marquis, he is a devil of a fellow—a devil of a fellow! He fought, I am told, just like Crillon; rushed in on that rascal and fairly beat down his guard, and had him pinned to the ground before he knew that they had crossed swords!"

"Well," I said, "there is one scoundrel the less. That is all."

"Ah, but that is not all!" my visitor replied more seriously. "It should be, but it is not; and it is for that reason I am come to you. You know St. Germain?"

"I know that his father and you are—well, that you take opposite sides," I said smiling.

"That is pretty well known," he answered coldly. "Anyway, this lad is to fight St. Germain tomorrow; and now I hear that M. de Clan, St. Germain's father, is for shutting him up. Getting a LETTRE DE CACHET or anything else you please, and away with him."

"What! St. Germain?" I said.

"No!" M. de Saintonge answered, prolonging the sound to the utmost. "St. Mesmin!"

"Oh," I said, "I see."

"Yes," the Marquis retorted pettishly, "but I don't. I don't see. And I beg to remind you, M. de Rosny, that this lad is my wife's second cousin through her step-father, and that I shall resent any interference with him. I have spent enough and done enough in the King's service to have my wishes respected in a small matter such as this; and I shall regard any severity exercised towards my kinsman as a direct offence to myself. Whereas M. de Clan, who will doubtless be here in a few minutes, is—"

"But stop," I said, interrupting him, "I heard you speaking of this young fellow the other day. You did not tell me then that he was your kinsman."

"Nevertheless he is; my wife's second cousin," he answered with heat.

"And you wish him to—"

"Be let alone!" he replied interrupting me in his turn more harshly than I approved. "I wish him to be let alone. If he will fight St. Germain, and kill or be killed, is that the King's affair that he need interfere? I ask for no interference," M. de Saintonge continued bitterly, "only for fair play and no favour. And for M. de Clan who is a Republican at heart, and a Bironist, and has never done anything but thwart the King, for him to come now, and—faugh! it makes me sick."

"Yes," I said drily; "I see."

"You understand me?"

"Yes," I said, "I think so."

"Very well," he replied haughtily—he had gradually wrought himself into a passion; "be good enough to bear my request in mind then; and my services also. I ask no more, M. de Rosny, than is due to me and to the King's honour."

And with that, and scarcely an expression of civility, he left me. Some may wonder, I know, that, having in the Edict of Blois, which forbade duelling and made it a capital offence, an answer to convince even his arrogance, I did not use this weapon; but, as a fact, the edict was not published until the following June, when, partly in consequence of this affair and at my instance, the King put it forth.

Saintonge could scarcely have cleared the gates before his prediction was fulfilled. His enemy arrived hot foot, and entered to me with a mien so much lowered by anxiety and trouble that I hardly knew him for the man who had a hundred times rebuffed me, and whom the King's offers had found consistently obdurate. All I had ever known of M. de Clan heightened his present humility and strengthened his appeal; so that I felt pity for him proportioned not only to his age and necessity, but to the depth of his fall. Saintonge had rightly anticipated his request; the first, he said, with a trace of his old pride, that he had made to the King in eleven years: his son, his only son and only child—the single heir of his name! He stopped there and looked at me; his eyes bright, his lips trembling and moving without sound, his hands fumbling on his knees.

"But," I said, "your son wishes to fight, M. de Clan?"

He nodded.

"And you cannot hinder him?"

He shrugged his shoulders grimly. "No," he said; "he is a St. Germain."

"Well, that is just my case," I answered. "You see this young fellow St. Mesmin was commended to me, and is, in a manner, of my household; and that is a fatal objection. I cannot possibly act against him in the manner you propose. You must see that; and for my wishes, he respects them less than your son regards yours."

M. de Clan rose, trembling a little on his legs, and glaring at me out of his fierce old eyes. "Very well," he said, "it is as much as I expected. Times are changed—and faiths—since the King of Navarre slept under the same bush with Antoine St. Germain on the night before Cahors! I wish you good-day, M. le Marquis."

I need not say that my sympathies were with him, and that I would have helped him if I could; but in accordance with the maxim which I have elsewhere explained, that he who places any consideration before the King's service is not fit to conduct it, I did not see my way to thwart M. de Saintonge in a matter so small. And the end justified my inaction; for the duel, taking place that evening, resulted in nothing worse than a serious, but not dangerous, wound which St. Mesmin, fighting with the same fury as in the morning, contrived to inflict on his opponent.

For some weeks after this I saw little of the young firebrand, though from time to time he attended my receptions and invariably behaved to me with a modesty which proved that he placed some bounds to his presumption. I heard, moreover, that M. de Saintonge, in acknowledgment of the triumph over the St. Germain which he had afforded him, had taken him up; and that the connection between the families being publicly avowed, the two were much together.

Judge of my surprise, therefore, when one day a little before Christmas, M. de Saintonge sought me at the Arsenal during the preparation of the plays and interludes—which were held there that year—and, drawing me aside into the garden, broke into a furious tirade against the young fellow.

"But," I said, in immense astonishment, "what is this? I thought that he was a young man quite to your mind; and—"

"He is mad!" he answered.

"Mad?" I said.

"Yes, mad!" he repeated, striking the ground violently with his cane. "Stark mad, M. de Rosny. He does not know himself! What do you think—but it is inconceivable. He proposes to

marry my daughter! This penniless adventurer honours Mademoiselle de Saintonge by proposing for her!"

"Pheugh!" I said. "That is serious."

"He—he! I don't think I shall ever get over it!" he answered.

"He has, of course, seen Mademoiselle?"

M. de Saintonge nodded.

"At your house, doubtless?"

"Of course!" he replied, with a snap of rage.

"Then I am afraid it is serious," I said.

He stared at me, and for an instant I thought that he was going to quarrel with me. Then he asked me why.

I was not sorry to have this opportunity of at once increasing his uneasiness, and requiting his arrogance. "Because," I said, "this young man appears to me to be very much out of the common. Hitherto, whatever he has said he would do, he has done. You remember Crillon? Well, I trace a likeness. St. Mesmin has much of his headlong temper and savage determination. If you will take my advice, you will proceed with caution."

M. de Saintonge, receiving an answer so little to his mind, was almost bursting with rage. "Proceed with caution!" he cried. "You talk as if the thing could be entertained, or as if I had cause to fear the coxcomb! On the contrary, I intend to teach him a lesson a little confinement will cool his temper. You must give me a letter, my friend, and we will clap him in the Bastille for a month or two."

"Impossible," I said firmly. "Quite impossible, M. le Marquis."

M. de Saintonge looked at me, frowning. "How?" he said arrogantly. "Have my services earned no better answer than that?"

"You forget," I replied. "Let me remind you that less than a month ago you asked me not to interfere with St. Mesmin; and at your instance I refused to accede to M. de Clan's request that I would confine him. You were then all for non-interference, M. de Saintonge, and I cannot blow hot and cold. Besides, to be plain with you," I continued, "even if that were not the case, this young fellow is in a manner under my protection; which renders it impossible for me to move against him. If you like, however, I will speak to him."

"Speak to him!" M. de Saintonge cried. He was breathless with rage. He could say no more. It may be imagined how unpalatable my answer was to him.

But I was not disposed to endure his presumption and ill-temper beyond a certain point; and feeling no sympathy with him in a difficulty which he had brought upon himself by his spitefulness, I answered him roundly. "Yes," I said, "I will speak to him, if you please. But not otherwise. I can assure you, I should not do it for everyone."

But M. de Saintonge's chagrin and rage at finding himself thus rebuffed, in a quarter where his haughty temper had led him to expect an easy compliance, would not allow him to stoop to my offer. He flung away with expressions of the utmost resentment, and even in the hearing of my servants uttered so many foolish and violent things against me, that had my discretion been no greater than his I must have taken notice of them. As, however, I had other and more important affairs upon my hands, and it has never been my practice to humour such hot-heads by placing myself on a level with them, I was content to leave his punishment to St. Mesmin; assured that in him M. de Saintonge would find an opponent more courageous and not less stubborn than himself.

The event bore me out, for within a week M. de St. Mesmin's pretensions to the hand of Mademoiselle de Saintonge shared with the Biron affair the attention of all Paris. The young lady, whose reputation and the care which had been spent on her breeding, no less than her gifts of person and character, deserved a better fate, attained in a moment a notoriety far from enviable; rumour's hundred tongues alleging, and probably with truth—for what father can vie with a gallant in a maiden's eyes?—that her inclinations were all on the side of the pretender. At any rate, St. Mesmin had credit for them; there was talk of stolen meetings and a bribed waiting-woman; and though such tales were probably as false as those who gave them currency were fair, they obtained credence with the thoughtless, and being repeated from one to another, in time reached her father's ears, and contributed with St. Mesmin's persecution to render him almost beside himself.

Doubtless with a man of less dogged character, or one more amenable to reason, the Marquis would have known how to deal; but the success which had hitherto rewarded St. Mesmin's course of action had confirmed the young man in his belief that everything was to be won by courage; so that the more the Marquis blustered and threatened the more persistent the suitor showed

himself. Wherever Mademoiselle's presence was to be expected, St. Mesmin appeared, dressed in the extreme of the fashion and wearing either a favour made of her colours or a glove which he asserted that she had given him. Throwing himself in her road on every occasion, he expressed his passion by the most extravagant looks and gestures; and protected from the shafts of ridicule alike by his self-esteem and his prowess, did a hundred things that rendered her conspicuous and must have covered another than himself with inextinguishable laughter.

In these circumstances M. de Saintonge began to find that the darts which glanced off his opponent's armour were making him their butt; and that he, who had valued himself all his life on a stately dignity and a pride: almost Spanish, was rapidly becoming the laughing-stock of the Court. His rage may be better imagined than described, and doubtless his daughter did not go unscathed. But the ordinary contemptuous refusal which would have sent another suitor about his business was of no avail here; he had no son, while St. Mesmin's recklessness rendered the boldest unwilling to engage him. Saintonge found himself therefore at his wits' end, and in this emergency bethought him again of a LETTRE DE CACHET. But the King proved as obdurate as his minister; partly in accordance with a promise he had made me about a year before that he would not commonly grant what I had denied, and partly because Biron's affair had now reached a stage in which Saintonge's aid was no longer of importance.

Thus repulsed, the Marquis made up his mind to carry his daughter into the country; but St. Mesmin meeting this with the confident assertion that he would abduct her within a week, wherever she was confined, Saintonge, desperate as a baited bull, and trembling with rage—for the threat was uttered at Zamet's and was repeated everywhere—avowed equally publicly that since the King would give him no satisfaction he would take the law into his own hands, and serve this impudent braggart as Guise served St. Megrin. As M. le Marquis maintained a considerable household, including some who would not stick at a trifle, it was thought likely enough that he would carry out his threat; especially as the provocation seemed to many to justify it. St. Mesmin was warned, therefore; but his reckless character was so well known that odds were freely given that he would be caught tripping some night—and for the last time.

At this juncture, however, an unexpected ally, and one whose appearance increased Saintonge's rage to an intolerable extent, took up St. Mesmin's quarrel. This was young St. Germain, who, quitting his chamber, was to be seen everywhere on his antagonist's arm. The old feud between the Saint Germain and Saintonges aggravated the new; and more than one brawl took place in the streets between the two parties. St. Germain never moved without four armed servants; he placed others at his friend's disposal; and wherever he went he loudly proclaimed what he would do if a hair of St. Mesmin's head were injured.

This seemed to place an effectual check on M. de Saintonge's purpose; and my surprise was great when, about a week later, the younger St. Germain burst in upon me one morning, with his face inflamed with anger and his dress in disorder; and proclaimed, before I could rise or speak, that St. Mesmin had been murdered.

"How?" I said, somewhat startled. "And when?"

"By M. de Saintonge! Last night!" he answered furiously. "But I will have justice; I will have justice, M. de Rosny, or the King—"

I checked him as sternly as my surprise would let me; and when I had a little abashed him—which was not easy, for his temper vied in stubbornness with St. Mesmin's—I learned the particulars. About ten o'clock on the previous night St. Mesmin had received a note, and, in spite of the remonstrances of his servants, had gone out alone. He had not returned nor been seen since, and his friends feared the worst.

"But on what grounds?" I said, astonished to find that that was all.

"What!" St. Germain cried, flaring up again. "Do you ask on what grounds? When M. de Saintonge has told a hundred what he would do to him! What he would do—do, I say? What he has done!"

"Pooh!" I said. "It is some assignation, and the rogue is late in returning."

"An assignation, yes," St. Germain retorted; "but one from which he will not return."

"Well, if he does not, go to the Chevalier du Guet," I answered, waving him off. "Go! do you hear? I am busy," I continued. "Do you think that I am keeper of all the young sparks that bay the moon under the citizens' windows? Be off, sir!"

He went reluctantly, muttering vengeance; and I, after rating Maignan soundly for admitting him, returned to my work, supposing that before night I should hear of St. Mesmin's safety. But the matter took another turn, for while I was at dinner the Captain of the Watch came to speak to me. St. Mesmin's cap had been found in a bye-street near the river, in a place where there were marks of a struggle; and his friends were furious. High words had already passed between the two factions, St. Germain openly accusing Saintonge of the murder; plainly, unless something were done at once, a bloody fray was imminent.

"What do you think yourself, M. le Marchand?" I said, when I had heard him out.

He shrugged his shoulders. "What can I think, your Excellency?" he said. "What else was to be expected?"

"You take it for granted that M. de Saintonge is guilty?"

"The young man is gone," he answered pithily.

In spite of this, I thought the conclusion hasty, and contented myself with bidding him see St. Germain and charge him to be quiet; promising that, if necessary, the matter should be investigated and justice done. I still had good hopes that St. Mesmin's return would clear up the affair, and the whole turn out to be a freak on his part; but within a few hours tidings that Saintonge had taken steps to strengthen his house and was lying at home, refusing to show himself, placed a different and more serious aspect on the mystery. Before noon next day M. de Clan, whose interference surprised me not a little, was with me to support his son's petition; and at the King's LEVEE next day St. Germain accused his enemy to the King's face, and caused an angry and indecent scene in the chamber.

When a man is in trouble foes spring up, as the moisture rises through the stones before a thaw. I doubt if M. de Saintonge was not more completely surprised than any by the stir which ensued, and which was not confined to the St. Germain's friends, though they headed the accusers. All whom he had ever offended, and all who had ever offended him, clamoured for justice; while St. Mesmin's faults being forgotten and only his merits remembered, there were few who did not bow to the general indignation, which the young and gallant, who saw that at any moment his fate might be theirs, did all in their power to foment. Finally, the arrival of St. Mesmin the father, who came up almost broken-hearted, and would have flung himself at the King's feet on the first opportunity, roused the storm to the wildest pitch; so that, in the fear lest M. de Biron's friends should attempt something under cover of it, I saw the King and gave him my advice. This was to summon Saintonge, the St. Germain, and old St. Mesmin to his presence and effect a reconciliation; or, failing that, to refer the matter to the Parliament.

He agreed with me and chose to receive them next day at the Arsenal. I communicated his commands, and at the hour named we met, the King attended by Roquelaure and myself. But if I had flattered myself that the King's presence would secure a degree of moderation and reasonableness I was soon undeceived; for though M. de St. Mesmin had only his trembling head and his tears to urge, Clan and his son fell upon Saintonge with so much violence—to which he responded by a fierce and resentful sullenness equally dangerous—that I feared that blows would be struck even before the King's face. Lest this should happen and the worst traditions of old days of disorder be renewed, I interposed and managed at length to procure silence.

"For shame, gentlemen, for shame!" the King said, gnawing his moustachios after a fashion he had when in doubt. "I take Heaven to witness that I cannot say who is right! But this brawling does no good. The one fact we have is that St. Mesmin has disappeared."

"Yes, sire; and that M. de Saintonge predicted his disappearance," St. Germain cried, impulsively. "To the day and almost to the hour."

"I gather, de Saintonge," the King said, turning to him, mildly, "that you did use some expressions of that kind."

"Yes, sire, and did nothing upon them," he answered resentfully. But he trembled as he spoke. He was an older man than his antagonist, and the latter's violence shook him.

"But does M. de Saintonge deny," St. Germain broke out afresh before the King could speak, "that my friend had made him a proposal for his daughter? and that he rejected it?"

"I deny nothing!" Saintonge cried, fierce and trembling as a baited animal. "For that matter, I would to Heaven he had had her!" he continued bitterly.

"Ay, so you say now," the irrepressible St. Germain retorted, "when you know that he is dead!"

"I do not know that he is dead," Saintonge answered. "And, for that matter, if he were alive and here now he should have her. I am tired; I have suffered enough."

"What! Do you tell the King," the young fellow replied incredulously, "that if St. Mesmin were here you would give him your daughter?"

"I do—I do!" the other exclaimed passionately. "To be rid of him, and you, and all your crew!"

"Tut, tut!" the King said. "Whatever betides, I will answer for it, you shall have protection and justice, M. de Saintonge. And do you, young sir, be silent. Be silent, do you hear! We have had too much noise introduced into this already."

He proceeded then to ask certain details, and particularly the hour at which St. Mesmin had been last seen. Notwithstanding that these facts were in the main matters of common agreement, some wrangling took place over them; which was only brought to an end at last in a manner sufficiently startling. The King with his usual thoughtfulness had bidden St. Mesmin be seated.

On a sudden the old man rose; I heard him utter a cry of amazement, and following the direction of his eyes I looked towards the door. There stood his son!

At an appearance so unexpected a dozen exclamations filled the air; but to describe the scene which ensued or the various emotions that were evinced by this or that person, as surprise or interest or affection moved them, were a task on which I am not inclined to enter. Suffice it that the foremost and the loudest in these expressions of admiration was young St. Germain; and that the King, after glancing from face to face in puzzled perplexity, began to make a shrewd guess at the truth.

"This is a very timely return, M. de St. Mesmin," he said drily.

"Yes, sire," the young impertinent answered, not a whit abashed.

"Very timely, indeed."

"Yes, sire. And the more as St. Germain tells me that M. de Saintonge in his clemency has reconsidered my claims; and has undertaken to use that influence with Mademoiselle which—"

But on that word M. de Saintonge, comprehending the RUSE by which he had been overcome, cut him short; crying out in a rage that he would see him in perdition first. However, we all immediately took the Marquis in hand, and made it our business to reconcile him to the notion; the King even making a special appeal to him, and promising that St. Mesmin should never want his good offices. Under this pressure, and confronted by his solemn undertaking, Saintonge at last and with reluctance gave way. At the King's instance, he formally gave his consent to a match which effectually secured St. Mesmin's fortunes, and was as much above anything the young fellow could reasonably expect as his audacity and coolness exceeded the common conceit of courtiers.

Many must still remember St. Mesmin; though an attack of the small-pox, which disfigured him beyond the ordinary, led him to leave Paris soon after his marriage. He was concerned, I believe, in the late ill-advised rising in the Vivarais; and at that time his wife still lived. But for some years past I have not heard his name, and only now recall it as that of one whose adventures, thrust on my attention, formed an amusing interlude in the more serious cares which now demand our notice.

V.

THE LOST CIPHER.

I might spend many hours in describing the impression which this great Sovereign made upon my mind; but if the part which she took in the conversation I have detailed does not sufficiently exhibit those qualities of will and intellect which made her the worthy compeer of the King my master, I should labour in vain. Moreover, my stay in her neighbourhood, though Raleigh and Griffin showed me every civility, was short. An hour after taking leave of her, on the 15th of August, 1601, I sailed from Dover, and crossing to Calais without mishap anticipated with pleasure the King's satisfaction when he should hear the result of my mission, and learn from my mouth the just and friendly sentiments which Queen Elizabeth entertained towards him.

Unfortunately I was not able to impart these on the instant. During my absence a trifling matter had carried the King to Dieppe, whence his anxiety on the queen's account, who was shortly to be brought to bed, led him to take the road to Paris. He sent word to me to follow him, but necessarily some days elapsed before we met; an opportunity of which his enemies and mine were quick to take advantage, and that so insidiously and with so much success as to imperil not my reputation only but his happiness.

The time at their disposal was increased by the fact; that when I reached the Arsenal I found the Louvre vacant, the queen, who lay at Fontainebleau, having summoned the King thither. Ferret, his secretary, however, awaited me with a letter, in which Henry, after expressing his desire to see me, bade me nevertheless stay in Paris a day to transact some business. "Then," he continued, "come to me, my friend, and we will discuss the matter of which you know. In the meantime send me your papers by Ferret, who will give you a receipt for them."

Suspecting no danger in a course which was usual enough, I hastened to comply. Summoning Maignan, who, whenever I travelled, carried my portfolio, I unlocked it, and emptying the papers in a mass on the table, handed them in detail to Ferret. Presently, to my astonishment, I found that one, and this the most important, was missing. I went over the papers again, and again, and yet again. Still it was not to be found.

It will be remembered that whenever I travelled on a mission of importance I wrote my

despatches in one of three modes, according as they were of little, great, or the first importance; in ordinary characters that is, in a cipher to which the council possessed the key, or in a cipher to which only the King and I held keys. This last, as it was seldom used, was rarely changed; but it was my duty, on my return from each mission, immediately to remit my key to the King, who deposited it in a safe place until another occasion for its use arose.

It was this key which was missing. I had been accustomed to carry it in the portfolio with the other papers; but in a sealed envelope which I broke and again sealed with my own signet whenever I had occasion to use the cipher. I had last seen the envelope at Calais, when I handed the portfolio to Maignan before beginning my journey to Paris; the portfolio had not since been opened, yet the sealed packet was missing.

More than a little uneasy, I recalled Maignan, who had withdrawn after delivering up his charge, "You rascal!" I said with some heat. "Has this been out of your custody?"

"The bag?" he answered, looking at it. Then his face changed. "You have cut your finger, my lord," he said.

I had cut it slightly in unbuckling the portfolio, and a drop or two of blood had fallen on the papers. But his reference to it at this moment, when my mind was full of my loss, angered me, and even awoke my suspicions. "Silence!" I said, "and answer me. Have you let this bag out of your possession?" This time he replied straightforwardly that he had not.

"Nor unlocked it?"

"I have no key, your excellency."

That was true; and as I had at bottom the utmost confidence in his fidelity, I pursued the inquiry no farther in that direction, but made a third search among the papers. This also failing to bring the packet to light, and Ferret being in haste to be gone, I was obliged for the moment to put up with the loss, and draw what comfort I could from the reflection that, no despatch in the missing cipher was extant. Whoever had stolen it, therefore, another could be substituted for it and no one the worse. Still I was unwilling that the King should hear of the mischance from a stranger, and be led to think me careless; and I bade Ferret be silent about it unless Henry missed the packet, which might not happen before my arrival.

When the secretary, who readily assented, had given me his receipt and was gone, I questioned Maignan afresh and more closely, but with no result. He had not seen me place the packet in the portfolio at Calais, and that I had done so I could vouch only my own memory, which I knew to be fallible. In the meantime, though the mischance annoyed me, I attached no great importance to it; but anticipating that a word of explanation would satisfy the King, and a new cipher dispose of other difficulties, I dismissed the matter from my mind.

Twenty-four hours later, however, I was rudely awakened. A courier arrived from Henry, and surprising me in the midst of my last preparations at the Arsenal, handed me an order to attend his Majesty; an order couched in the most absolute and peremptory terms, and lacking all those friendly expressions which the King never failed to use when he wrote to me. A missive so brief and so formal—and so needless, for I was on the point of starting—had not reached me for years; and coming at this moment when I had no reason to expect a reverse of fortune, it had all the effect of a thunder-bolt in a clear sky. I stood stunned, the words which I was dictating to my secretary dying on my lips. For I knew the King too well, and had experienced his kindness too lately to attribute the harshness of the order to chance or forgetfulness; and assured in a moment that I stood face to face with a grave crisis, I found myself hard put to it to hide my feelings from those about me.

Nevertheless, I did so with all effort; and, sending for the courier asked him with an assumption of carelessness what was the latest news at Court. His answer, in a measure, calmed my fears, though it could not remove them. He reported that the queen had been taken ill or so the rumour went.

"Suddenly?" I said.

"This morning," he answered.

"The King was with her?"

"Yes, your excellency."

"Had he left her long when he sent this letter?"

"It came from her chamber, your excellency."

"But—did you understand that her Majesty was in danger?" I urged.

As to that, however, the man could not say anything; and I was left to nurse my conjectures during the long ride to Fontainebleau, where we arrived in the cool of the evening, the last stage through the forest awakening memories of past pleasure that combated in vain the disorder and

apprehension which held my spirits. Dismounting in the dusk at the door of my apartments, I found a fresh surprise awaiting me in the shape of M. de Concini, the Italian; who advancing to meet me before my foot was out of the stirrup, announced that he came from the King, who desired my instant attendance in the queen's closet.

Knowing Concini to be one of those whose influence with her Majesty had more than once tempted the King to the most violent measures against her—from which I had with difficulty dissuaded him—I augured the worst from the choice of such a messenger; and wounded alike in my pride and the affection in which I held the King, could scarcely find words in which to ask him if the queen was ill.

"Indisposed, my lord," he replied carelessly. And he began to whistle.

I told him that I would remove my boots and brush off the dust, and in five minutes be at his service.

"Pardon me," he said, "my orders are strict; and they are to request you to attend his Majesty immediately. He expected you an hour ago."

I was thunderstruck at this—at the message, and at the man's manner; and for a moment I could scarcely restrain my indignation. Fortunately the habit of self-control came to my aid in time, and I reflected that an altercation with such a person could only lower my dignity. I contented myself, therefore, with signifying my assent by a nod, and without more ado followed him towards the queen's apartments.

In the ante-chamber were several persons, who as I passed saluted me with an air of shyness and incertitude which was enough of itself to put me on my guard. Concini attended me to the door of the chamber; there he fell back, and Mademoiselle Galigai, who was in waiting, announced me. I entered, assuming a serene countenance, and found the King and queen together, no other person being present. The queen was lying at length on a couch, while Henry, seated on a stool at her feet, seemed to be engaged in soothing and reassuring her. On my entrance, he broke off and rose to his feet.

"Here he is at last," he said, barely looking at me. "Now, if you will, dear heart ask him your questions. I have had no communication with him, as you know, for I have been with you since morning."

The queen, whose face was flushed with fever, made a fretful movement but did not answer.

"Do you wish me to ask him?" Henry said with admirable patience.

"If you think it is worth while," she muttered, turning sullenly and eyeing me from the middle of her pillows with disdain and ill-temper.

"I will, then," he answered, and he turned to me. "M. de Rosny," he said in a formal tone, which even without the unaccustomed monsieur cut me to the heart, "be good enough to tell the queen how the key to my secret cipher, which I entrusted to you, has come to be in Madame de Verneuil's possession."

I looked at him in the profoundest astonishment, and for a moment remained silent, trying to collect my thoughts under this unexpected blow. The queen saw my hesitation and laughed spitefully. "I am afraid, sire," she said, "that you have overrated this gentleman's ingenuity, though doubtless it has been much exercised in your service."

Henry's face grew red with vexation. "Speak, man!" he cried. "How came she by it?"

"Madame de Verneuil?" I said.

The queen laughed again. "Had you not better take him out first, sir," she said scornfully, "and tell him what to say?"

"Fore God, madame," the King cried passionately, "you try me too far! Have I not told you a hundred times, and sworn to you, that I did not give Madame de Verneuil this key?"

"If you did not give her that," the queen muttered sullenly, picking at the silken coverlet which lay on her feet, "you have given her all else. You cannot deny it."

Henry let a gesture of despair escape him. "Are we to go back to that?" he said. Then turning to me, "Tell her," he said between his teeth; "and tell me. VENTRE SAINT GRIS—are you dumb, man?"

Discerning nothing for it at the moment save to bow before this storm, which had arisen so suddenly, and from a quarter the least expected, I hastened to comply. I had not proceeded far with my story, however—which fell short, of course, of explaining how the key came to be in Madame de Verneuil's hands—before I saw that it won no credence with the queen, but rather confirmed her in her belief that the King had given to another what he had denied to her. And more; I saw that in proportion as the tale failed to convince her, it excited the King's wrath and disappointment. He several times cut me short with expressions of the utmost impatience, and at

last, when I came to a lame conclusion—since I could explain nothing except that the key was gone—he could restrain himself no longer. In a tone in which he had never addressed me before, he asked me why I had not, on the instant, communicated the loss to him; and when I would have defended myself by adducing the reason I have given above, overwhelmed me with abuse and reproaches, which, as they were uttered in the queen's presence, and would be repeated, I knew, to the Concinis and Galigais of her suite, who had no occasion to love me, carried a double sting.

Nevertheless, for a time, and until he had somewhat worn himself out, I let Henry proceed. Then, taking advantage of the first pause, I interposed. Reminding him that he had never had cause to accuse me of carelessness before, I recalled the twenty-two years during which I had served him faithfully, and the enmities I had incurred for his sake; and having by these means placed the discussion on a more equal footing, I descended again to particulars, and asked respectfully if I might know on whose authority Madame de Verneuil was said to have the cipher.

"On her own!" the queen cried hysterically. "Don't try to deceive me,—for it will be in vain. I know she has it; and if the King did not give it to her, who did?"

"That is the question, madam," I said.

"It is one easily answered," she retorted. "If you do not know, ask her."

"But, perhaps, madam, she will not answer," I ventured.

"Then command her to answer in the King's name!" the queen replied, her cheeks burning with fever. "And if she will not, then has the King no prisons—no fetters smooth enough for those dainty ankles?"

This was a home question, and Henry, who never showed to less advantage than when he stood between two women, cast a sheepish glance at me. Unfortunately the queen caught the look, which was not intended for her; and on the instant it awoke all her former suspicions. Supposing that she had discovered our collusion, she flung herself back with a cry of rage, and bursting into a passion of tears, gave way to frantic reproaches, wailing and throwing herself about with a violence which could not but injure one in her condition.

The King stared at her for a moment in sheer dismay. Then his chagrin turned to anger; which, as he dared not vent it on her, took my direction. He pointed impetuously to the door. "Begone, sir!" he said in a passion, and with the utmost harshness. "You have done mischief enough here. God grant that we see the end of it! Go—go!" he continued, quite beside himself with fury. "Send Galigai here, and do you go to your lodging until you hear from me!"

Overwhelmed and almost stupefied by the catastrophe, I found my way out I hardly knew how, and sending in the woman, made my escape from the ante-chamber. But hasten as I might, my disorder, patent to a hundred curious eyes, betrayed me; and, if it did not disclose as much as I feared or the inquisitive desired, told more than any had looked to learn. Within an hour it was known at Nemours that his Majesty had dismissed me with high words—some said with a blow; and half a dozen couriers were on the road to Paris with the news.

In my place some might have given up all for lost; but in addition to a sense of rectitude, and the consciousness of desert, I had to support me an intimate knowledge of the King's temper; which, though I had never suffered from it to this extent before, I knew to be on occasion as hot as his anger was short lived, and his disposition generous. I had hopes, therefore—although I saw dull faces enough among my suite, and some pale ones—that the King's repentance would overtake his anger, and its consequences outstrip any that might flow from his wrath. But though I was not altogether at fault in this, I failed to take in to account one thing—I mean Henry's anxiety on the queen's account, her condition, and his desire to have an heir; which so affected the issue, that instead of fulfilling my expectations the event left me more despondent than before. The King wrote, indeed, and within the hour, and his letter was in form an apology. But it was so lacking in graciousness; so stiff, though it began "My good friend Rosny," and so insincere, though it referred to my past services, that when I had read it I stood awhile gazing at it, afraid to turn lest De Vic and Varennes, who had brought it, should read my disappointment in my face.

For I could not hide from myself that the gist of the letter lay, not in the expressions of regret which opened it, but in the complaint which closed it; wherein the King sullenly excused his outbreak on the ground of the magnitude of the interests which my carelessness had endangered and the opening to harass the queen which I had heedlessly given. "This cipher," he said, "has long been a whim with my wife, from whom, for good reasons well known to you and connected with the Grand Duke's Court, I have thought fit to withhold it. Now nothing will persuade her that I have not granted to another what I refused her. I tremble, my friend, lest you be found to have done more ill to France in a moment of carelessness than all your services have done good."

It was not difficult to find a threat underlying these words, nor to discern that if the queen's fancy remained unshaken, and ill came of it, the King would hardly forgive me. Recognising this, and that I was face to face with a crisis from which I could not escape but by the use of my utmost powers, I assumed a serious and thoughtful air; and without affecting to disguise the fact that the King was displeased with me, dismissed the envoys with a few civil speeches, in which I

did not fail to speak of his Majesty in terms that even malevolence could not twist to my disadvantage.

When they were gone, doubtless to tell Henry how I had taken it, I sat down to supper with La Font, Boisrueil, and two or three gentlemen of my suite; and, without appearing too cheerful, contrived to eat with my usual appetite. Afterwards I withdrew in the ordinary course to my chamber, and being now at liberty to look the situation in the face, found it as serious as I had feared. The falling man has few friends; he must act quickly if he would retain any. I was not slow in deciding that my sole chance of an honourable escape lay in discovering—and that within a few hours—who stole the cipher and conveyed it to Madame de Verneuil; and in placing before the queen such evidence of this as must convince her.

By way of beginning, I summoned Maignan and put him through a severe examination. Later, I sent for the rest of my household—such, I mean, as had accompanied me—and ranging them against the walls of my chamber, took a flambeau in my hand and went the round of them, questioning each, and marking his air and aspect as he answered. But with no result; so that after following some clues to no purpose, and suspecting several persons who cleared themselves on the spot, I became assured that the chain must be taken up at the other end, and the first link found among Madame de Verneuil's following.

By this time it was nearly midnight, and my people were dropping with fatigue. Nevertheless, a sense of the desperate nature of the case animating them, they formed themselves voluntarily into a kind of council, all feeling their probity attacked; in which various modes of forcing the secret from those who held it were proposed—Maignan's suggestions being especially violent. Doubting, however, whether Madame had more than one confidante, I secretly made up my mind to a course which none dared to suggest; and then dismissing all to bed, kept only Maignan to lie in my chamber, that if any points occurred to me in the night I might question him on them.

At four o'clock I called him, and bade him go out quietly and saddle two horses. This done, I slipped out myself without arousing anyone, and mounting at the stables, took the Orleans road through the forest. My plan was to strike at the head, and surprising Madame de Verneuil while the event; still hung uncertain, to wrest the secret from her by trick or threat. The enterprise was desperate, for I knew the stubbornness and arrogance of the woman, and the inveterate enmity which she entertained towards me, more particularly since the King's marriage. But in a dangerous case any remedy is welcome.

I reached Malesherbes, where Madame was residing with her parents, a little before seven o'clock, and riding without disguise to the chateau demanded to see her. She was not yet risen, and the servants, whom my appearance threw into the utmost confusion, objected this to me; but I knew that the excuse was no real one, and answered roughly that I came from the King, and must see her. This opened all doors, and in a moment I found myself in her chamber. She was sitting up in bed, clothed in an elegant nightgown, and seemed in no wise surprised to see me. On the contrary, she greeted me with a smile and a taunting word; and omitted nothing that might evince her disdain or hurt my dignity. She let me advance without offering me a chair; and when, after saluting her, I looked about for one, I found that all the seats except one very low stool had been removed from the room.

This was so like her that it did not astonish me, and I baffled her malice by leaning against the wall. "This is no ordinary honour—from M. de Rosny!" she said, flouting me with her eyes.

"I come on no ordinary mission, madame," I said as gravely as I could.

"Mercy!" she exclaimed in a mocking tone. "I should have put on new ribbons, I suppose!"

"From the King, madame," I continued, not allowing myself to be moved, "to inquire how you obtained possession of his cipher."

She laughed loudly. "Good, simple King," she said, "to ask what he knows already!"

"He does not know, madame," I answered severely.

"What?" she cried, in affected surprise. "When he gave it to me himself!"

"He did not, madame."

"He did, sir!" she retorted, firing up. "Or if he did not, prove it—prove it! And, by the way," she continued, lowering her voice again, and reverting to her former tone of spiteful badinage, "how is the dear queen? I heard that she was indisposed yesterday, and kept the King in attendance all day. So unfortunate, you know, just at this time." And her eyes twinkled with malicious amusement.

"Madame," I said, "may I speak plainly to you?"

"I never heard that you could speak otherwise," she answered quickly. "Even his friends never called M. de Rosny a wit; but only a plain, rough man who served our royal turn well enough in rough times; but is now growing—"

"Madame!"

"A trifle exigent and superfluous."

After that, I saw that it was war to the knife between us; and I asked her in very plain terms if she were not afraid of the queen's enmity, that she dared thus to flaunt the King's favours before her.

"No more than I am afraid of yours," she answered hardily.

"But if the King is disappointed in his hopes?"

"You may suffer; very probably will," she answered, slowly and smiling, "not I. Besides, sir—my child was born dead. He bore that very well."

"Yet, believe me, madame, you run some risk."

"In keeping what the King has given me?" she answered, raising her eyebrows.

"No! In keeping what the King has not given you!" I answered sternly. "Whereas, what do you gain?"

"Well," she replied, raising herself in the bed, while her eyes sparkled and her colour rose, "if you like, I will tell you. This pleasure, for one thing—the pleasure of seeing you there, awkward, booted, stained, and standing, waiting my will. That—which perhaps you call a petty thing—I gain first of all. Then I gain your ruin, M. de Rosny; I plant a sting in that woman's breast; and for his Majesty, he has made his bed and may lie on it."

"Have a care, madame!" I cried, bursting with indignation at a speech so shameless and disloyal. "You are playing a dangerous game, I warn you!"

"And what game have you played?" she replied, transported on a sudden with equal passion. "Who was it tore up the promise of marriage which the King gave me? Who was it prevented me being Queen of France? Who was it hurried on the match with this tradeswoman, so that the King found himself wedded, before he knew it? Who was it—but enough; enough!" she cried, interrupting herself with a gesture full of rage. "You have ruined me, you and your queen between you, and I will ruin you!"

"On the contrary, madame," I answered, collecting myself for a last effort, and speaking with all the severity which a just indignation inspired, "I have not ruined you. But if you do not tell me that which I am here to learn—I will!"

She laughed out loud. "Oh, you simpleton!" she said. "And you call yourself a statesman! Do you not see that if I do not tell it, you are disgraced yourself and powerless, and can do me no harm? Tell it you? When I have you all on the hip—you, the King, the queen! Not for a million crowns, M. de Rosny!"

"And that is your answer, madame?" I said, choking with rage. It had been long since any had dared so to beard me.

"Yes," she replied stoutly; "it is! Or, stay; you shall not go empty-handed." And thrusting her arm under the pillow she drew out, after a moment's search, a small packet, which she held out towards me. "Take it!" she said, with a taunting laugh. "It has served my turn. What the King gave me, I give you."

Seeing that it was the missing key to the cipher, I swallowed my rage and took it; and being assured by this time that I could effect nothing by staying longer, but should only expose myself to fresh insults, I turned on my heel, with rudeness equal to her own, and, without taking leave of her, flung the door open and went out. I heard her throw herself back with a shrill laugh of triumph. But as, the moment the door fell to behind me, my thoughts began to cast about for another way of escape—this failing—I took little heed of her, and less of the derisive looks to which the household, quickly taking the cue, treated me as I passed. I flung myself into the saddle and galloped off, followed by Maignan, who presently, to my surprise, blurted out a clumsy word of congratulation.

I turned on him in amazement, and, swearing at him, asked him what he meant.

"You have got it," he said timidly, pointing to the packet which I mechanically held in my hand.

"And to what purpose?" I cried, glad of this opportunity of unloading some of my wrath. "I want, not the paper, but the secret, fool! You may have the paper for yourself if you will tell me how Madame got it."

Nevertheless, his words led me to look at the packet. I opened it, and, having satisfied myself that it contained the original and not a copy, was putting it up again when my eyes fell on a small spot of blood which marked one corner of the cover. It was not larger than a grain of corn, but it awoke, first, a vague association and then a memory, which as I rode grew stronger and more

definite, until, on a sudden, discovery flashed upon me—and the truth. I remembered where I had seen spots of blood before—on the papers I had handed to Ferret and remembered, too, where that blood had come from. I looked at the cut now, and, finding it nearly healed, sprang in my saddle. Of a certainty this paper had gone through my hands that day! It had been among the others; therefore it must have been passed to Ferret inside another when I first opened the bag! The rogue, getting it and seeing his opportunity, and that I did not suspect, had doubtless secreted it, probably while I was attending to my hand.

I had not suspected him before, because I had ticked off the earlier papers as I handed them to him; and had searched only among the rest and in the bag for the missing one. Now I wondered that I had not done so, and seen the truth from the beginning; and in my impatience I found the leagues through the forest, though the sun was not yet high and the trees sheltered us, the longest I had ridden in my life. When the roofs of the chateau at length appeared before us, I could scarcely keep my pace within bounds. Reflecting how Madame de Verneuil had overreached herself, and how, by indulging in that last stroke of arrogance, she had placed the secret in my hands, I had much ado to refrain from going to the King booted and unwashed as I was; and though I had not eaten since the previous evening. However, the habit of propriety, which no man may lightly neglect, came to my aid. I made my toilet, and, having broken my fast standing, hastened to the Court. On the way I learned that the King was in the queen's garden, and, directing my steps thither, found him walking with my colleagues, Villeroy and Sillery, in the little avenue which leads to the garden of the Conciergerie. A number of the courtiers were standing on the low terrace watching them, while a second group lounged about the queen's staircase. Full of the news which I had for the King, I crossed the terrace; taking no particular heed of anyone, but greeting such as came in my way in my usual fashion. At the edge of the terrace I paused a moment before descending the three steps; and at the same moment, as it happened, Henry looked up, and our eyes met. On the instant he averted his gaze, and, turning on his heel in a marked way, retired slowly to the farther end of the walk.

The action was so deliberate that I could not doubt he meant to slight me; and I paused where I was, divided between grief and indignation, a mark for all those glances and whispered gibes in which courtiers indulge on such occasions. The slight was not rendered less serious by the fact that the King was walking with my two colleagues; so that I alone seemed to be out of his confidence, as one soon to be out of his councils also.

I perceived all this, and was not blind to the sneering smiles which were exchanged behind my back; but I affected to see nothing, and to be absorbed in sudden thought. In a minute or two the King turned and came back towards me; and again, as if he could not restrain his curiosity, looked up so that our eyes met. This time I thought that he would beckon me to him, satisfied with the lengths to which he had already carried his displeasure. But he turned again, with a light laugh.

At this a courtier, one of Sillery's creatures, who had presumed on the occasion so far as to come to my elbow, thought that he might safely amuse himself with me. "I am afraid that the King grows older, M. de Rosny," he said, smirking at his companions. "His sight seems to be failing."

"It should not be neglected then," I said grimly. "I will tell him presently what you say."

He fell back, looking foolish at that, at the very moment that Henry, having taken another turn, dismissed Villeroy, who, wiser than the puppy at my elbow, greeted me with particular civility as he passed. Freed from him, Henry stood a moment hesitating. He told me afterwards that he had not turned from me a yard before his heart smote him; and that but for a mischievous curiosity to see how I should take it, he would not have carried the matter so far. Be that as it may—and I do not doubt this, any more than I ever doubted the reality of the affection in which he held me—on a sudden he raised his hand and beckoned to me.

I went down to him gravely, and not hurriedly. He looked at me with some signs of confusion in his face. "You are late this morning," he said.

"I have been on your Majesty's business," I answered.

"I do not doubt that," he replied querulously, his eyes wandering. "I am not—I am troubled this morning." And after a fashion he had when he was not at his ease, he ground his heel into the soil and looked down at the mark. "The queen is not well. Sillery has seen her, and will tell you so."

M. de Sillery, whose constant opposition to me at the council-board I have elsewhere described, began to affirm it. I let him go on for a little time, and then interrupted him brusquely. "I think it was you," I said, "who nominated Ferret to be one of the King's clerks."

"Ferret?" he exclaimed, reddening at my tone, while the King, who knew me well, pricked up his ears.

"Yes," I said; "Ferret."

"And if so?" Sillery asked, haughtily. "What do you mean?"

"Only this," I said. "That if his Majesty will summon him to the queen's closet, without warning or delay, and ask him in her presence how much Madame de Verneuil gave him for the King's cipher, her Majesty, I think, will learn something which she wishes to know."

"What?" the King cried. "You have discovered it? But he gave you a receipt for the papers he took."

"For the papers he took with my knowledge—yes, sire."

"The rogue!" Sillery exclaimed viciously. "I will go and fetch him."

"Not so—with your Majesty's leave," I said, interposing quickly. "M. de Sillery may say too much or too little. Let a lackey take a message, bidding him go to the queen's closet, and he will suspect nothing."

The King assented, and bade me go and give the order. When I returned, he asked me anxiously if I felt sure that the man would confess.

"Yes, if you pretend to know all, sire," I answered. "He will think that Madame has betrayed him."

"Very well," Henry said. "Then let us go."

But I declined to be present; partly on the ground that if I were there the queen might suspect me of inspiring the man, and partly because I thought that the rogue would entertain a more confident hope of pardon, and be more likely to confess, if he saw the King alone. I contrived to keep Sillery also; and Henry giving the word, as he mounted the steps, that he should be back presently, the whole Court remained in a state of suspense, aware that something was in progress but in doubt what, and unable to decide whether I were again in favour or now on my trial.

Sillery remained talking to me, principally on English matters, until the dinner hour; which came and went, neglected by all. At length, when the curiosity of the mass of courtiers, who did not dare to interrupt us, had been raised by delay to an almost intolerable pitch, the King returned, with signs of disorder in his bearing; and, crossing the terrace in half a dozen strides, drew me hastily, along with Sillery, into the grove of white mulberry trees. There we were no sooner hidden in part, though not completely, than he threw his arms about me and embraced me with the warmest expressions. "Ah, my friend," he said, putting me from him at last, "what shall I say to you?"

"The queen is satisfied, sire?"

"Perfectly; and desires to be commended to you."

"He confessed, then?"

Henry nodded, with a look in his face that I did not understand. "Yes," he said, "fully. It was as you thought, my friend. God have mercy upon him!"

I started. "What?" I said. "Has he—"

The King nodded, and could not repress a shudder. "Yes," he said; "but not, thank Heaven, until he had left the closet. He had something about him."

Sillery began anxiously to clear himself; but the King, with his usual good nature, stopped him, and bade us all go and dine, saying that we must be famished. He ended by directing me to be back in an hour, since his own appetite was spoiled. "And bring with you all your patience," he added, "for I have a hundred questions to ask you. We will walk towards Avon, and I will show you the surprise which I am preparing for the queen."

Alas, I would I could say that all ended there. But the rancour of which Madame de Verneuil had given token in her interview with me was rather aggravated than lessened by the failure of her plot and the death of her tool. It proved to be impenetrable by all the kindnesses which the King lavished upon her; neither the legitimation of the child which she soon afterwards bore, nor the clemency which the King—against the advice of his wisest ministers extended to her brother Auvergne, availing to expel it from her breast. How far she or that ill-omened family were privy to the accursed crime which, nine years later, palsied France on the threshold of undreamed-of glories, I will not take on myself to say; for suspicion is not proof. But history, of which my beloved master must ever form so great a part, will lay the blame where it should rest.

THE MAN OF MONCEAUX.

In the month of August of this year the King found some alleviation of the growing uneasiness which his passion for Madame de Conde occasioned him in a visit to Monceaux, where he spent two weeks in such diversions as the place afforded. He invited me to accompany him, but on my representing that I could not there—so easily as in my own closet, where I had all the materials within reach—prepare the report which he had commanded me to draw up, he directed me to remain in Paris until it was ready, and then to join him.

This report which he was having written, not only for his own satisfaction but for the information of his heir, took the form of a recital of all the causes and events, spread over many years, which had induced him to take in hand the Great Design; together with a succinct account of the munitions and treasures which he had prepared to carry it out. As it included many things which were unknown beyond the council, and some which he shared only with me—and as, in particular, it enumerated the various secret alliances and agreements which he had made with the princes of North Germany, whom a premature discovery must place at the Emperor's mercy—it was necessary that I should draw up the whole with my own hand, and with the utmost care and precaution. This I did; and that nothing might be wanting to a memorial which I regarded with justice as the most important of the many State papers which it had fallen to my lot; to prepare, I spent seven days in incessant labour upon it. It was not, therefore, until the third week in August: that I was free to travel to Monceaux.

I found my quarters assigned to me in a pavilion called the Garden House; and, arriving at supper time, sat down with my household with more haste and less ceremony than was my wont. The same state of things prevailed, I suppose, in the kitchen; for we had not been seated half an hour when a great hubbub arose in the house, and the servants rushing in cried out that a fire had broken out below, and that the house was in danger of burning.

In such emergencies I take it to be the duty of a man of standing to bear himself with as much dignity as is consistent with vigour; and neither to allow himself to be carried away by the outcry and disorder of the crowd, nor to omit any direction that may avail. On this occasion, however, my first thought was given to the memorial I had prepared for the King; which I remembered had been taken with other books and papers to a room over the kitchen. I lost not a moment, therefore, in sending Maignan for it; nor until I held it safely in my hand did I feel myself at liberty to think of the house. When I did, I found that the alarm exceeded the danger; a few buckets of water extinguished a beam in the chimney which had caught fire, and in a few moments we were able to resume the meal with the added vivacity which such an event gave to the conversation. It has never been my custom to encourage too great freedom at my table; but as the company consisted, with a single exception, of my household, and as this person—a Monsieur de Vilain, a young gentleman, the cousin of one of my wife's maids-of-honour—showed himself possessed of modesty as well as wit, I thought that the time excused a little relaxation.

This was the cause of the misfortune which followed, and bade fair to place me in a position of as great difficulty as I have ever known; for, having in my good humour dismissed the servants, I continued to talk for an hour or more with Vilain and some of my gentlemen; the result being that I so far forgot myself, when I rose, as to leave the report where I had laid it on the table. In the passage I met a man whom the King had sent to inquire about the fire; and thus reminded of the papers I turned back to the room; greatly vexed with myself for negligence which in a subordinate I should have severely rebuked, but never doubting that I should find the packet where I had left it.

To my chagrin the paper was gone. Still I could not believe that it had been stolen, and supposing that Maignan or one of my household had seen it and taken it to my closet, I repaired thither in haste. I found Maignan already there, with M. Boisrueil, one of my gentlemen, who was waiting to ask a favour; but they knew nothing of the report, and though I sent them down forthwith, with directions to make strict but quiet inquiry, they returned at the end of half an hour with long faces and no news.

Then I grew seriously alarmed; and reflecting on the many important secrets which the memorial contained, whereof a disclosure must spoil plans so long and sedulously prepared, I found myself brought on a sudden face to face with disaster. I could not imagine how the King, who had again and again urged on me the utmost precaution, would take such a catastrophe; nor how I should make it known to him. For a moment, therefore, while I listened to the tale, I felt the hair rise on my head and a shiver descend my back; nor was it without an uncommon effort that I retained my coolness and composure.

Plainly no steps in such a position could be too stringent. I sent Maignan with an order to close all the doors and let no one pass out. Then I made sure that none of the servants had entered the room, between the time of my rising and return; and this narrowed the tale of those who could have taken the packet to eleven, that being the number of persons who had sat down with me. But having followed the matter so far, I came face to face with this difficulty: that all the eleven were, with one exception, in my service and in various ways pledged to my interests, so that I could not conceive even the possibility of a betrayal by them in a matter so important.

I confess, at this, the perspiration rose upon my brow; for the paper was gone. Still, there remained one stranger; and though it seemed scarcely less difficult to suspect him, since he

could have no knowledge of the importance of the document, and could not have anticipated that I should leave it in his power, I found in that the only likely solution. He was one of the Vilains of Pareil by Monceaux, his father living on the edge of the park, little more than a thousand yards from the chateau; and I knew no harm of him. Still, I knew little; and for that reason was forward to believe that there, rather than in my own household, lay the key to the enigma.

My suspicions were not lessened when I discovered that he alone of the party at table had left the house before the doors were closed; and for a moment I was inclined to have him followed and seized. But I could scarcely take a step so decisive without provoking inquiry; and I dared not at this stage let the King know of my negligence. I found myself, therefore, brought up short, in a state of exasperation and doubt difficult to describe; and the most minute search within the house and the closest examination of all concerned failing to provide the slightest clue, I had no alternative but to pass the night in that condition.

On the morrow a third search seeming still the only resource, and proving as futile as the others, I ordered La Trape and two or three in whom I placed the greatest confidence to watch their fellows, and report anything in their bearing or manner that seemed to be out of the ordinary course; while I myself went to wait; on the King, and parry his demand for the memorial as well as I could. This it was necessary to do without provoking curiosity; and as the lapse of each minute made the pursuit of the paper less hopeful and its recovery a thing to pray for rather than expect, it will be believed that I soon found the aspect of civility which I was obliged to wear so great a trial of my patience, that I made an excuse and retired early to my lodging.

Here my wife, who shared my anxiety, met me with a face full of meaning. I cried out to know if they had found the paper.

"No," she answered; "but if you will come into your closet I will tell you what I have learned."

I went in with her, and she told me briefly that the manner of Mademoiselle de Mars, one of her maids, had struck her as suspicious. The girl had begun to cry while reading to her; and when questioned had been able to give no explanation of her trouble.

"She is Vilain's cousin?" I said.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Bring her to me," I said. "Bring her to me without the delay of an instant."

My wife hastened to comply; and whatever had been the girl's state earlier, before the fright of this hasty summons had upset her, her agitation when thus confronted with me gave me, before a word was spoken, the highest hopes that I had here the key to the mystery. I judged that it might be necessary to frighten her still more, and I started by taking a harsh tone with her; but before I had said many words she obviated the necessity of this by falling at my wife's feet and protesting that she would tell all.

"Then speak quickly, wench!" I said. "You know where the paper is."

"I know who has it!" she answered, in a voice choked with sobs.

"Who?"

"My cousin, M. de Vilain."

"Ha! and has taken it to his house?"

But she seemed for a moment unable to answer this; her distress being such that my wife had to fetch a vial of pungent salts to restore her before she could say more. At length she found voice to tell us that M. de Vilain had taken the paper, and was this evening to hand it to an agent of the Spanish ambassador.

"But, girl," I said sternly, "how do you know this?"

Then she confessed that the cousin was also the lover, and had before employed her to disclose what went on in my household, and anything of value that could be discovered there. Doubtless the girl, for whom my wife, in spite of her occasional fits of reserve and temper, entertained no little liking, enjoyed many opportunities of prying; and would have continued still to serve him had not this last piece of villainy, with the stir which it caused in the house and the rigorous punishment to be expected in the event of discovery, proved too much for her nerves. Hence this burst of confession; which once allowed to flow, ran on almost against her will. Nor did I let her pause to consider the full meaning of what she was saying until I had learned that Vilain was to meet the ambassador's agent an hour after sunset at the east end of a clump of trees which stood in the park; and being situate between his, Vilain's, residence and the chateau, formed a convenient place for such a transaction.

"He will have it about him?" I said.

She sobbed a moment, but presently confessed. "Yes; or it will be in the hollow of the most easterly tree. He was to leave it there, if the agent could not keep the appointment."

"Good!" I said; and then, having assured myself by one or two questions of that, of which her state of distress and agitation left me in little doubt—namely, that she was telling the truth—I committed her to my wife's care; bidding the Duchess lock her up in a safe place upstairs, and treat her to bread and water until I had taken the steps necessary to prove the fact, and secure the paper.

After this—but I should be tedious were I to describe the alternations of hope and fear in which I passed the period of suspense. Suffice it that I informed no one, not even Maignan, of what I had discovered, but allowed those in the secret of the loss still to pursue their efforts; while I, by again attending the Court, endeavoured at once to mitigate the King's impatience and persuade the world that all was well. A little before the appointed time, however I made a pretext to rise from supper, and quietly calling out Boisrueil, bade him bring four of the men, armed, and Maignan and La Trape. With this small body I made my way out by a private door, and crossed the park to the place Mademoiselle had, indicated.

Happily, night had already begun to close in, and the rendezvous was at the farther side of the clump of trees. Favoured by these circumstances, we were able to pass round the thicket—some on one side and some on the other—without noise or disturbance; and fortunate enough, having arrived at the place, to discover a man walking uneasily up and down on the very spot where we expected to find him. The evening was so far advanced that it was not possible to be sure that the man was Vilain; but as all depended on seizing him before he had any communication with the Spanish agent, I gave the signal, and two of my men, springing on him from either side, in a moment bore him to the ground and secured him.

He proved to be Vilain, so that, when he was brought face to face with me, I was much less surprised than he affected to be. He played the part of an ignorant so well, indeed, that, for a moment, I was staggered by his show of astonishment, and by the earnestness with which he denounced the outrage; nor could Maignan find anything on him. But, a moment later, remembering the girl's words, I strode to the nearest tree, and, groping about it, in a twinkling unearthed the paper from a little hollow in the trunk that seemed to have been made to receive it. I need not say with what relief I found the seals unbroken; nor with what indignation I turned on the villain thus convicted of an act of treachery towards the King only less black than the sin against hospitality of which he had been guilty in my house. But the discovery I had made seemed enough of itself to overwhelm him; for, after standing apparently stunned while I spoke, he jerked himself suddenly out of his captors' hands, and made a desperate attempt to escape. Finding this hopeless, and being seized again before he had gone four paces, he shouted, at the top of his voice: "Back! back! Go back!"

We looked about, somewhat startled, and Boisrueil, with presence of mind, ran into the darkness to see if he could detect the person addressed; but though he thought that he saw the skirt of a flying cloak disappear in the gloom, he was not sure; and I, having no mind to be mixed up with the ambassador, called him back. I asked Vilain to whom he had called, but the young man, turning sullen, would answer nothing except that he knew naught of the paper. I thought it best, therefore, to conduct him at once to my lodgings, whither it will be believed that I returned with a lighter heart than I had gone out. It was, indeed, a providential escape.

How to punish the traitor was another matter, for I could scarcely do so adequately without betraying my negligence. I determined to sleep on this, however, and, for the night, directed him to be locked into a chamber in the south-west turret, with a Swiss to guard the door; my intention being to interrogate him farther on the morrow. However, Henry sent for me so early that I was forced to postpone my examination; and, being detained by him until evening, I thought it best to tell him, before I left, what had happened.

He heard the story with a look of incredulity, which, little by little, gave way to a broad smile. "Well," he said, "Grand Master, never chide me again! I have heard that Homer sometimes nods; but if I were to tell this to Sillery or Villeroy, they would not believe me."

"They would believe anything that your Majesty told them," I said. "But you will not tell them this?"

"No," he said kindly, "I will not; and there is my hand on it. For the matter of that, if it had happened to them, they would not have told me."

"And perhaps been the wiser for that," I said.

"Don't believe it," he answered. "But now, what of this young Vilain? You have him safe?"

"Yes, sire."

"The girl is one degree worse; she betrays both sides to save her skin."

"Still, I promised—"

"Oh, she must go," Henry said. "I quite understand. But for him—we had better have no scandal. Keep him until to-morrow, and I will see his father, and have him sent out of the country."

"And he will go scot free," I said, bluntly, "when a rope and the nearest tree—"

"Yes, my friend," Henry answered with a dry smile; "but that should have been done last night. As it is, he is your guest and we must give an account of him. But first drain him dry. Frighten him, as you please, and get all out of him; then I wish them joy of him. Faugh! and he a young man! I would not be his father for two such crowns as mine!"

As I returned to my lodgings I thought over these words; and I fell to wondering by what stages Vilain had sunk so low. Occasionally admitted to my table, he had always borne himself with a modesty and discretion that had not failed to prepossess me; indeed, the longer I considered the King's saying, the greater was the surprise I felt at this DENOUEMENT; which left me in doubt whether my dullness exceeded my negligence or the young man's parts surpassed his wickedness.

A few questions, I thought, might resolve this; but having been detained by the King until supper-time, I postponed the interview until I rose. Then bidding them bring in the prisoner, I assumed my harshest aspect and prepared to blast him by discovering all his vileness to his face.

But when I had waited a little, only Maignan came in, with an air of consternation that brought me to my feet. "Why, man, what is it?" I cried.

"The prisoner," he faltered. "If your excellency pleases—"

"I do not please!" I said sternly, believing that I knew what had happened. "Is he dead?"

"No, your excellency; but, he has escaped."

"Escaped? From that room?"

Maignan nodded.

"Then, PAR DIEU!" I replied, "the man who was on guard shall suffer in his place! Escaped? How could he escape except by treachery? Where was the guard?"

"He was there, excellency. And he says that no one passed him."

"Yet the man is gone?"

"The room is empty."

"But the window—the window, fool, is fifty feet from the ground!" I said. "And not so much footing outside as would hold a crow!"

Maignan shrugged his shoulders, and in a rage I bade him follow me, and went myself to view the place; to which a number of my people had already flocked with lights, so that I found some difficulty in mounting the staircase. A very brief inspection, however, sufficed to confirm my first impression that Vilain could have escaped by the door only; for the window, though it lacked bars and boasted a tiny balcony, hung over fifty feet of sheer depth, so that evasion that way seemed in the absence of ladder or rope purely impossible. This being clear, I ordered the Swiss to be seized; and as he could give no explanation of the escape, and still persisted that he was as much in the dark as anyone, I declared that I would make an example of him, and hang him unless the prisoner was recaptured within three days.

I did not really propose to do this, but in my irritation I spoke so roundly that my people believed me; even Boisrueil, who presently came to intercede for the culprit, who, it seemed, was a favourite. "As for Vilain," he continued; "you can catch him whenever you please."

"Then catch him before the end of three days," I answered obstinately, "and the man lives."

The truth was that Vilain's escape placed me in a position of some discomfort; for though, on the one hand, I had no particular desire to get him again into my hands, seeing that the King could effect as much by a word to his father as I had proposed to do while I held him safe; on the other hand, the evasion placed me very peculiarly in regard to the King himself, who was inclined to think me ill or suddenly grown careless. Some of the facts, too, were leaking out, and provoking smiles among the more knowing, and a hint here and there; the result of all being that, unable to pursue the matter farther in Vilain's case, I hardened my heart and persisted that the Swiss should pay the penalty.

This obstinacy on my part had an unforeseen issue. On the evening of the second day, a little before supper-time, my wife came to me, and announced that a young lady had waited on her with a tale so remarkable that she craved leave to bring her to me that I might hear it.

"What is it?" I said impatiently.

"It is about M. Vilain," my wife answered, her face still wearing all the marks of lively astonishment.

"Ha!" I exclaimed. "I will see her then. But it is not that baggage who—"

"No," my wife answered. "It is another."

"One of your maids?"

"No, a stranger."

"Well, bring her," I said shortly.

She went, and quickly returned with a young lady, whose face and modest bearing were known to me, though I could not, at the moment, recall her name. This was the less remarkable as I am not prone to look much in maids' faces, leaving that to younger men; and Mademoiselle de Figeac's, though beautiful, was disfigured on this occasion by the marked distress under which she was labouring. Accustomed as I was to the visits of persons of all classes and characters who came to me daily with petitions, I should have been disposed to cut her short, but for my wife's intimation that her errand had to do with the matter which annoyed me. This, as well as a trifle of curiosity—from which none are quite free—inclined me to be patient; and I asked her what she would have with me.

"Justice, M. le Duc," she answered simply. "I have heard that you are seeking M. de Vilain, and that one of your people is lying under sentence for complicity in his escape."

"That is true, mademoiselle," I said. "If you can tell me—"

"I can tell you how he escaped, and by whose aid," she answered.

It is my custom to betray no astonishment, even when I am astonished. "Do so," I said.

"He escaped through the window," she answered firmly, "by my brother's aid."

"Your brother's?" I exclaimed, amazed at her audacity. "I do not remember him."

"He is only thirteen years old."

I could hide my astonishment no longer. "You must be mad, girl!" I said, "mad! You do not know what you are saying! The window of the room in which Vilain was confined is fifty feet from the ground, and you say that your brother, a boy of thirteen, contrived his escape?"

"Yes, M. de Sully," she answered. "And the man who is about to suffer is innocent."

"How was it done, then?" I asked, not knowing what to think of her persistence.

"My brother was flying a kite that day," she answered. "He had been doing so for a week or more, and everyone was accustomed to seeing him here. After sunset, the wind being favourable, he came under M. de Vilain's window, and, when it was nearly dark, and the servants and household were at supper, he guided the kite against the balcony outside the window."

"But a man cannot descend by a kite-string!"

"My brother had a knotted rope, which M. de Vilain drew up," she answered simply; "and afterwards, when he had descended, disengaged."

I looked at her in profound amazement.

"Your brother acted on instructions?" I said at last.

"On mine," she answered.

"You avow that?"

"I am here to do so," she replied, her face white and red by turns, but her eyes continuing to meet mine.

"This is a very serious matter," I said. "Are you aware, mademoiselle, why M. Vilain was arrested, and of what he is accused?"

"Perfectly," she answered; "and that he is innocent. More!" she continued, clasping her hands, and looking at me bravely, "I am willing both to tell you where he is, and to bring him, if you please, into your presence."

I stared at her. "You will bring him here?" I said.

"Within five minutes," she answered, "if you will first hear me."

"What are you to him?" I said.

She blushed vividly. "I shall be his wife or no one's," she said; and she looked a moment at my wife.

"Well, say what you have to say!" I cried roughly.

"This paper, which it is alleged that he stole—it was not found on him; but in the hollow of a tree."

"Within three paces of him! And what was he doing there?"

"He came to meet me," she answered, her voice trembling slightly. "He could have told you so, but he would not shame me."

"This is true?" I said, eyeing her closely.

"I swear it!" she answered, clasping her hands. And then, with a sudden flash of rage, "Will the other woman swear to her tale?" she cried.

"Ha!" I said, "what other woman?"

"The woman who sent you to that place," she answered. "He would not tell me her name, or I would go to her now and wring the truth from her. But he confessed to me that he had let a woman into the secret of our meeting; and this is her work."

I stood a moment pondering, with my eyes on the girl's excited face, and my thoughts, following this new clue through the maze of recent events; wherein I could not fail to see that it led to a very different conclusion from that at which I had arrived. If Vilain had been foolish enough to wind up his love-passages with Mademoiselle de Mars by confiding to her his passion for the Figeac, and even the place and time at which the latter was so imprudent as to meet him, I could fancy the deserted mistress laying this plot; and first placing the packet where we found it, and then punishing her lover by laying the theft at his door. True, he might be guilty; and it might be only confession and betrayal on which jealousy had thrust her. But the longer I considered the whole of the circumstances, as well as the young man's character, and the lengths to which I knew a woman's passion would carry her, the more probable seemed the explanation I had just received.

Nevertheless, I did not at once express my opinion; but veiling the chagrin I naturally felt at the simple part I had been led to play—in the event I now thought probable—I sharply ordered Mademoiselle de Figeac to retire into the next room; and then I requested my wife to fetch her maid.

Mademoiselle de Mars had been three days in solitary confinement, and might be taken to have repented of her rash accusation were it baseless. I counted somewhat on this; and more on the effect of so sudden a summons to my presence. But at first sight it seemed that I did so without cause. Instead of the agitation which she had displayed when brought before me to confess, she now showed herself quiet and even sullen; nor did the gleam of passion, which I thought that I discerned smouldering in her dark eyes, seem to promise either weakness or repentance. However, I had too often observed the power of the unknown over a guilty conscience to despair of eliciting the truth.

"I want to ask you two or three questions," I said civilly. "First, was M. de Vilain with you when you placed the paper in the hollow of the tree? Or were you alone?"

I saw her eyelids quiver as with sudden fear, and her voice shook as she stammered, "When I placed the paper?"

"Yes," I said, "when you placed the paper. I have reason to know that you did it. I wish to learn whether he was present, or you did it merely under his orders?"

She looked at me, her face a shade paler, and I do not doubt that her mind was on the rack to divine how much I knew, and how far she might deny and how far confess. My tone seemed to encourage frankness, however, and in a moment she said, "I placed it under his directions."

"Yes," I said drily, my last doubt resolved by the admission; "but that being so, why did Vilain go to the spot?"

She grew still a shade paler, but in a moment she answered, "To meet the agent."

"Then why did you place the paper in the tree?"

She saw the difficulty in which she had placed herself, and for an instant she stared at me with the look of a wild animal caught in a trap. Then, "In case the agent was late," she muttered.

"But since Vilain had to go to the spot, why did he not deposit the paper in the tree himself? Why did he send you to the place beforehand? Why did—" and then I broke off and cried harshly, "Shall I tell you why? Shall I tell you why, you false jade?"

She cowered away from me at the words, and stood terror-stricken, gazing at me like one fascinated. But she did not answer.

"Because," I cried, "your story is a tissue of lies! Because it was you, and you only, who stole this paper! Because—Down on your knees! down on your knees!" I thundered, "and confess! Confess, or I will have you whipped at the cart's tail, like the false witness you are!"

She threw herself down shrieking, and caught my wife by the skirts, and in a breath had said all I wanted; and more than enough to show me that I had suspected Vilain without cause, and both played the simpleton myself and harried my household to distraction.

So far good. I could arrange matters with Vilain, and probably avoid publicity. But what was now to be done with her?

In the case of a man I should have thought no punishment too severe, and the utmost rigour of the law too tender for such perfidy; but as she was a woman, and young, and under my wife's protection, I hesitated. Finally, the Duchess interceding, I leaned to the side of that mercy which the girl had not shown to her lover; and thought her sufficiently punished, at the moment by the presence of Mademoiselle de Figeac whom I called into the room to witness her humiliation, and in the future by dismissal from my household. As this imported banishment to her father's country-house, where her mother, a shrewd old Bearnaise, saved pence and counted lentils into the soup, and saw company once a quarter, I had perhaps reason to be content with her chastisement.

For the rest I sent for M. de Vilain, and by finding him employment in the finances, and interceding for him with the old Vicomte de Figeac, confirmed him in the attachment he had begun to feel for me before this unlucky event; nor do I doubt that I should have been able in time to advance him to a post worthy of the talents I discerned in him. But, alas, the deplorable crime, which so soon deprived me at one blow of my master and of power, put an end to this, among other and greater schemes.

VII.

THE GOVERNOR OF GUERET.

Without attaching to dreams greater importance than a prudent man will always be willing to assign to the unknown and unintelligible, I have been in the habit of reflecting on them; and have observed with some curiosity that in these later years of my life, during which France has enjoyed peace and comparative prosperity, my dreams have most often reproduced the stormy rides and bivouacs of my youth, with all the rough and bloody accompaniments which our day knows only by repute. Considering these visions, and comparing my sleeping apathy with my daylight reflections, I have been led to wonder at the power of habit; which alone makes it possible for a man who has seen a dozen stricken fields, and viewed, scarcely with emotion, the slaughter of a hundred prisoners, to turn pale at the sight of a coach accident, and walk a mile rather than see a rogue hang.

I am impelled to this train of thought by an adventure that befell me in the summer of this year 1605; and which, as it seemed to me in the happening to be rather an evil dream of old times than a waking episode of these, may afford the reader some diversion, besides relieving the necessary tedium of the thousand particulars of finance that render the five farms a study of the utmost intricacy.

My appointment to represent the King at the Assembly of Chatelherault had carried me in the month of July into Poitou. Being there, and desirous of learning for myself whether the arrest of Auvergne had pacified his country to the extent described by the King's agents, I determined to take advantage of a vacation of the assembly and venture as far in that direction as Gueret; though Henry, fearing lest the malcontents should make an attempt on my person in revenge for the death of Biron, had strictly charged me not to approach within twenty leagues of the Limousin.

I had with me for escort at Chatelherault a hundred horse; but, these seeming to be either too many or too few for the purpose, I took with me only ten picked men with Colet their captain, five servants heavily armed, and of my gentlemen Boisrueil and La Font. Parabere, to whom I opened my mind, consented to be my companion. I gave out that I was going to spend three days at Preuilly, to examine an estate there which I thought of buying, that I might have a residence in my government; and, having amused the curious with this statement, I got away at daybreak, and by an hour before noon was at Touron, where I stayed for dinner. That night we lay at a village, and the next day dined at St. Marcel. The second afternoon we reached Crozant.

Here I began to observe those signs of neglect and disorder which, at the close of the war, had been common in all parts of France, but in the more favoured districts had been erased by a decade of peace. Briars and thorns choked the roads, which ran through morasses, between fields which the husbandman had resigned to tares and undergrowth. Ruined hamlets were common, and everywhere wolves and foxes and all kinds of game abounded. But that which roused my ire to the hottest was the state of the bridges, which in this country, where the fords are in winter impassable, had been allowed to fall into utter decay. On all sides I found the peasants oppressed, disheartened, and primed with tales of the King's severity, which those who

had just cause to dread him had instilled into them. Bands of robbers committed daily excesses, and, in a word, no one thing was wanting to give the lie to the rose-coloured reports with which Bareilles, the Governor of Gueret, had amused the Council.

I confess that, at sight and thought of these things—of this country so devoured, the King's authority so contemned, all evils laid at his door, all his profits diverted—my anger burned within me, and I said more to Parabere than was perhaps prudent, telling him, in particular, what I designed against Bareilles, of whose double-dealing I needed no further proof; by what means I proposed to lull his suspicions for the moment, since we must lie at Gueret, and how I would afterwards, on the first occasion, have him seized and punished.

I forgot, while I avowed these things, that one weakness of Parabere's character which rendered him unable to believe evil of anyone. Even of Bareilles, though the two were the merest acquaintances, he could only think indulgently, because, forsooth, he too was a Protestant. He began to defend him therefore, and, seeing how the ground lay, after a time I let the matter drop.

Still I did not think that he had been serious in his plea, and that which happened on the following morning took me completely by surprise. We had left Crozant an hour, and I was considering whether, the road being bad, we should even now reach Gueret before night, when Parabere, who had made some excuse to ride forward, returned, to me with signs of embarrassment in his manner.

"My friend," he said, "here is a message from Bareilles."

"How?" I exclaimed. "A message? For whom?"

"For you," he said; "the man is here."

"But how did Bareilles know that I was coming?" I asked.

Parabere's confusion furnished me with the answer before he spoke. "Do not be angry, my friend," he said. "I wanted to do Bareilles a good turn. I saw that you were enraged with him, and I thought that I could not help him better than by suggesting to him to come and meet you in a proper spirit, and make the explanations which I am sure that he has it in his power to make. Yesterday morning, therefore, I sent to him."

"And he is here?" I said drily.

Parabere admitted with a blush that he was not. His messenger had found Bareilles on the point of starting against a band of plunderers who had ravaged the country for a twelvemonth. He had sent me the most; civil messages therefore—but he had not come. "However, he will be at Gueret to-morrow," Parabere added cheerfully.

"Will he?" I said.

"I will answer for it," he answered. "In the meantime, he has done what he can for our comfort."

"How?" I said,

"He bids us not to attempt the last three leagues to Gueret to-night; the road is too bad. But to stay at Saury, where there is a good inn, and to-morrow morning he will meet us there."

"If the brigands have not proved too much for him," I said.

"Yes," Parabere answered, with a simplicity almost supernatural. "To be sure."

After this, it was no use to say anything to him, though his officiousness would have justified the keenest reproaches. I swallowed my resentment, therefore, and we went on amicably enough, though the valley of the Creuse, in its upper and wilder part, through which our road now wound, offered no objects of a kind to soften my anger against the governor. I saw enough of ruins, of blocked defiles, and overgrown roads; but of returning prosperity and growing crops, and the King's peace, I saw no sign—not so much as one dead robber.

About noon we alighted to eat a little at a wretched tavern by one of the innumerable fords. A solitary traveller who was here before us, and for a time kept aloof, wearing a grand and mysterious manner with a shabby coat, presently moved; edging himself up to me where I sat a little apart, eating with Parabere and my gentlemen.

"Sir," he said, on a sudden and without preface, "I see that you are the leader of this party."

As I was more plainly dressed than Parabere, and had been giving no orders, I wondered how he knew; but I answered, without any remark, "Well, sir; and what of that?"

"You are in great danger," he replied.

"I?" I said.

"Yes, sir; you!" he answered.

"You know me?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not I," he said, "but those who speak by me. Enough that you are in danger."

"From what?" I asked sceptically; while my companions stared, and the troopers and servants, who were just within hearing, listened open-mouthed.

"A one-eyed woman and a one-eyed house," he answered darkly. Then, before I could frame a question, he turned from me as abruptly as he had come, and, mounting a sorry mare that stood near, stumbled away through the ford.

It required little wit to see that the man was an astrologer, and one whose predictions, if they had not profited his clients more than himself, had been ominous indeed. I was inclined, therefore, to make sport of him, knowing that the pretenders to that art are to the true men as ten to one. But his words, and particularly the fact that he had asked for nothing, had impressed my followers differently; so that they talked of nothing else while we ate, and could still be heard discussing him in the saddle. The wildness of the road and the gloomy aspect of the valley had doubtless some effect on their minds; which a thunderstorm that shortly afterwards overtook us and drenched us to the skin did not tend to lighten. I was glad to see the roofs of Saury before us; though, on a nearer approach, we found all the houses except the inn ruined and tenantless; and even, that scorched and scarred, with the great gate that had once closed its courtyard prostrate in the road before it.

However, in view of the country we had come through, and the general desolation, we were thankful to find things no worse. The village stood at the entrance to a gorge, with the Creuse—here a fast-rushing stream—running at the back of the inn. The latter was of good size, stone-built and tiled, and, at first, seemed to be empty; but the servants presently unearthed a man and then a boy. Fires were lit, and the horses stabled; and a second room with a chimney being found, Parabere and I, with Colet and my gentlemen, took possession of it, leaving the kitchen to my following.

I had had my boots removed, and was drying my clothes and expecting supper, when Boisrueil, who was beside me, uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"What is it?" I said.

He did not answer, and I followed his eyes. A woman had just entered the room with a bundle of sticks. She had one eye!

I confess that, for an instant, this staggered me; but a moment's thought reminded me that the astrologer had come from this inn to us, and I smiled at the credulity which would have built on a coincidence that was no coincidence. When the woman had retired again, therefore, I rallied Boisrueil on his timidity; but, though he admitted the correctness of my reasoning, I saw that he was not entirely convinced. He started whenever a shutter flapped, or the draughts, which searched the grim old building through and through, threatened to extinguish our lights. He hung cloaks over the windows to obviate the latter inconvenience he said—and was continually going out and coming back with gloomy looks. Parabere joined me in rallying him, which we did without mercy; but when I had occasion, after a while, to pass through the outer room I found that he was not alone in his fears. The troopers sat moodily listening, or muttered together; while the cup passed round in silence. When I bade a man go on an errand to the stable, four went; and when I dropped a word to the woman who was attending to her pot, a dozen heads were stretched out to catch the answer.

Such a feeling—to which, in this instance, the murmur of the stream and the steady downpour of rain doubtless added something—is so contagious that I was not surprised to find Colet and La Font sinking under it. Only Parabere, in fact, rose quite superior to the notion, laughed at their fears, and drank to their better spirits; and, making the best of the situation, as became an old soldier, presently engaged me in tales of the war—fought again the siege of Laon, and buried men whose bodies had lain for ten years under the oaks at Fontaine Françoise.

Talk of this kind, which we still maintained after we had despatched our supper, was sufficiently engrossing to erase Boisrueil's fancies entirely from my mind. They were recalled by his sudden entrance, with Colet at his elbow, the faces of both full of importance. I saw that they had something to say, and asked what it was.

"We have been examining the back gate, M. le Marquis," Colet said.

"Well, man?"

"It is barricaded, and cannot be opened," he answered.

"Well," I said again, "there is nothing wonderful in that. Anyone can see that there has been rough work here. The front gate was stormed, I suppose, and the back one left standing."

"But if it is so barricaded that it is not possible to open it," he objected. "And the men have an idea—"

"Well?" I said, seeing that he hesitated.

"That this is a one-eyed house."

Parabere laughed loudly. "Of course it is!" he said. "That strolling rogue saw the gate as well as the woman, and made his profit of them."

"Pardon, sir!" Boisrueil answered bluntly, "That is just what he did not do!"

"Well," I said, silencing him by a gesture, "is that all?"

"No," he replied; "I have tasted the men's wine."

"And it is drugged?"

"No," he said. "On the contrary, it is a great deal too good for the price—or the house. And you ordered a litre apiece. Some have had two, and not asked twice for it!"

"Ho, ho!" I said, staring at him. "Are you sure of that?"

"Quite!" he said.

I was genuinely startled at last; but Parabere still made light of it. "What!" he said. "Are we a pack of nervous women, or one poor traveller in a solitary inn, that we see shadows and shake at them?"

"The inn is solitary enough," Boisrueil grumbled.

"But we are twenty swords!" Parabere retorted, opening his eyes wide. "Why, I have ridden all day in an enemy's country with less!"

"And been beaten with more at Craon."

"But, man alive, that was in a battle, and by an army!"

"Well, and there may be a battle and an army here," Boisrueil answered sulkily.

I was inclined to laugh at this as extravagance; but seeing that La Font and Colet sided with Boisrueil, I remembered that the latter was no coward though a great gossip; and I thought better of it. Accordingly, resolving to look into the thing myself, I bade La Font fetch a couple of lanterns, and, when he had done so, went out with him and Boisrueil as if I had a mind to go round the horses before I retired. Parabere declined to accompany me on the ground that he would not be at the pains of it; and Colet I left in the kitchen to keep an eye on the man and woman.

There was no moon, rain was still falling, and the yard, crowded with steaming, shivering horses, was dreary enough where the lanterns displayed it; but, accustomed to such a sight, I made, without regarding it, for the gate, which a moment's examination showed to be barricaded, as they had described, with great beams and stones. In this there was nothing beyond the ordinary, one entrance to a house being in troublous times better than two; but Boisrueil, bidding me kneel and look lower, I found, when I did so, that the soil under the beams—which did not touch the ground by some inches—was wet, and I began to understand. When he asked me at what hour rain had begun to fall, I answered two in the afternoon, and drew at once the inference at which he aimed—that the beams had been put there, and the gate barricaded, at some later hour.

"We reached here at six," he said; "it was done some time between two and six, my lord; therefore to-day. To-day," he repeated in a low voice; "and by a dozen men at least, Fewer could not move those beams."

"And the object?"

"To prevent our escape."

"But who are they?" I said, looking at him.

"The woman knows," he answered. "We must ask her, my lord."

I assented; and we went back into the house, where it would not have surprised me if we had found the wretches flown and the nest empty. But Colet had done his work too well. They were both there, and, in a moment, at a signal from Boisrueil, were secured and pinioned. Parabere, hearing the scuffle, came out and would have remonstrated, but I silenced him with a sharp word; and, despatching La Font with a couple of discreet men to keep watch in the court that we might not be surprised, I bade one of the servants throw some fir-cones on the fire. These, blazing up, filled the squalid room in a moment with a glare of light, which revealed alike the

livid faces of the two prisoners and the excited looks and dark countenances of my escort.

I bade them put the woman forward first, and addressed her sternly, telling her that I knew all, and that she would do well to confess; inasmuch as if she made a clean breast of the matter, I would grant her her life, and if she did not, she would be the first to die, since I would hang her were a single shot fired against the house.

The promise found her unmoved, but the threat, uttered in a tone which showed that I was in earnest, proved more effectual. With an ugly look, under which my men shrank as if her eye had power to scorch them, the hag said that she would confess, and, with impotent rage, admitted the truth of Boisrueil's surmises. The rearward gate had been barricaded that afternoon by the Great Band, who had had notice of our coming, and intended to attack us at midnight. I asked her how many they mustered.

"A hundred," she answered sullenly.

"Very well," I said. "And, supposing that we do not wait for them, how shall we escape? By the road to Gueret?"

"Fifty lie in ambush on it."

"By the road by which we came?"

"The other fifty lie there."

"Across the river?"

"There is no ford."

"Then in the village? If we seize some other building?"

"The village is watched, and this house," she answered, with a sparkle of joy in her eye.

At that the position began to assume so serious an aspect that I turned to Parabere to take his advice. We numbered twenty in all, and were well armed; but five to one are large odds, and we had little ammunition, while, for all we knew, the house might be fired with ease from the outside. The roads north and south being occupied, and the river enclosing us on the west, there remained only one direction in which escape seemed possible; but, as we knew nothing of the country, and the brigands everything, the desperate idea of plunging into it blindly, at night, and with pursuers at our heels, was dismissed as soon as formed.

Parabere interrupted these calculations by drawing me aside into the room in which we had supped, where, after rallying me on the whimsical notion of the Grand Master of the Ordnance and Governor of the Bastille being besieged in a paltry inn, he confessed that he had been wrong, and that the adventure was likely to prove serious. "Ten to one this is the very band that Bareilles is pursuing," he said.

"Very likely," I answered bluntly; "but the question is how are we to evade them. Are we to fight or fly?"

"Well, for lighting," he replied coolly; "the front gate lies in the road, there are no shutters to half the windows, the door is crazy, and there is a thatched pent-house against one wall."

"And no help-nearer than Gueret."

"Three leagues," he assented. "And from that we are cut off. Fifty men in the gorge might hold it against five hundred. Better man the courtyard here than that, tether the horses in the gateway, and fight it out."

"Perhaps so," I said; and we looked at one another, hearing through the open door the men muttering and whispering in the kitchen, and above their voices the dull murmur of the stream, which seemed of a piece with the bleak night outside, the ruined hamlet, and the danger that lurked round us. Bitterly repenting the hardihood that had led me to expose myself to such risks in breach of the King's commandment, I found it difficult to direct my mind to the immediate question. So many reflections connected with my mission at Chatelherault and other affairs of state would intrude that I seemed to be occupied rather with the results of my death at this juncture, and particularly the injury which it must inflict on the King's service, than with the question how I could escape.

However, Parabere soon recalled me to the point. "It is now ten o'clock," he said in a placid tone; "we have two hours."

"Yes," I answered; then, as if my mind had all the time been running in an under-current to the desired goal, I continued, "And we must make the most of them. We must remove the barricade, in the dark and quietly, from the rear to the front gate. Do you see? Then the moment they sound the attack in front we must slip out at the back, make a dash for the road, and through the gorge to Gueret."

"Good," Parabere assented, with the utmost coolness. "Why not? Let us do it."

We went in, and in a moment the orders were given, and, the men being charged to be silent and to make as little noise as possible over the work, we had every hope of accomplishing it undetected. To go out into the road and raise and replace the shattered gate would have been too bold a step. We contented ourselves, therefore, with removing four great baulks of timber from the one gate to the other, and placing them across the gap in such a manner that, being supported by large stones, they formed a pretty high barrier. To these, at Boisrueil's suggestion, were added three doors which we forced from their hinges in the house, and behind the whole, to cover our retreat the better, we tethered six sumpter horses in two lines.

It remained only to unbar the rear gate and see that it opened easily. This being done, as we had done all the rest, stealthily and in darkness, and by men who dared not speak above a whisper, I gave the word to hang the male prisoner and gag and bind the woman. Colet undertook these duties, and with a grim humour of his own hung the rascally host on the threshold where the brigands must run against him when they entered. Then I directed every man to saddle and bridle his nag and stand by it, and so we waited with what patience we might for the DENOUEMENT.

It seemed very long in coming, yet when it did, what with the restless movements of the horses and the melancholy murmur of the stream, it well-nigh took us by surprise. It was Boisrueil who touched my sleeve and made me aware of a low trampling on the road outside, a sound that had scarcely become clearly audible before it ceased. I judged that the moment was come, and passed the word in a whisper to open the gates. Unfortunately, they creaked, and I feared for a moment that I had been premature; but before they were more than ajar a harsh whistle startled the silence, a flare blazed up on the road, and a voice cried to charge.

On the instant the ground shook under the assailants' rush, but the barricade, which doubtless took the rogues by surprise, brought them to a sudden stop, and gave us time to file out. The heavy rain which was falling served to cover our movements almost as well as the baggage horses which we had posted for the purpose; while we ran the less risk, inasmuch as the flare they had kindled lit up the upper part of the house but left the courtyard in perfect darkness.

Naturally, once outside, we did not linger to see what happened, but, filing in a line and like ghosts up the bank of the stream, were glad to hit on the road a hundred and fifty paces away, where it entered the gorge. Here, where it was as dark as pitch, we whipped our horses into a canter and made a good pace for half a league, then, drawing rein, let our horses trot until the league was out. By that time we were through the gorge, and I gave the word to pull up, that we might listen and learn whether we were pursued. Before the order had quite brought us to a standstill, however, two figures on a sudden rose out of the darkness before us and barred the way. I was riding in the front rank, abreast of Parabere and La Font, and I had just time to lay my hand on a pistol when one of the figures spoke.

"Well, M. le Capitaine, what luck?" he cried, advancing, and drawing rein to turn with us.

I saw his mistake, and, raising my hand to check those behind, muttered in my beard that all had gone well.

"You got the man?"

"Yes," I said, peering at him through the darkness.

"Good!" he answered. "Then now for Bareilles, supper, and a full purse; and afterwards, for me, the quietest corner of France! The King will make a fine outcry, and I do not trust one gov—"

In a flash Parabere had him by the throat, and dragged him in a grip of iron on to the withers of his horse. Still he managed to utter a cry, and the other rascal, taking the alarm, whipped his horse round, and in a second got a start of twenty paces. Colet, a light man and well mounted, was after him in a trice, and we heard them go ding-dong, ding-dong, through the darkness for a mile or more as it seemed to us. Then a sharp scream came faintly down the wind.

"Good!" Parabere said cheerfully. "Let us be jogging." He had tied his prisoner neck and knees over the saddle before him.

"You heard what he said?" I muttered, as we moved on.

"Perfectly," he answered in the same tone.

"And you think?"

"I think, Grand Master," he replied drily, "that the sooner you are out of La Marche and Bareilles' government the longer you are likely to live."

I was quite of that opinion myself, having drawn the same inferences from the words the prisoner had uttered. But for the moment I had no alternative save to go on, and put a bold face on the matter; and accordingly I led the way forward at as fast a pace as the darkness and the

jaded state of our horses permitted. Colet presently joined us, and half an hour later a bunch of lights which appeared on the side of a hill in front proclaimed that we were nearing Gueret. From this point half a league across a rushy bottom and through a ford brought us to the gate, which opened before we summoned it. I had taken care to call to the van one of my men who knew the town; and he guided us quickly, no one challenging us, through a number of foul, narrow streets and under dark archways, among which a stranger must have gone astray. We reached at last a good-sized square, on one side of which—though the rest of the town lay buried in darkness—a large building, which I judged to be Bareilles' residence, exposed a dozen lighted windows to the street. Two or three figures lounged half-seen on the wide stone steps which led up to the entrance, and the rattle of dice, with a murmur of voices, came from the windows. Without a moment's hesitation I dismounted at the foot of the steps, and, bidding La Font and Boisrueil attend me, with three of the servants, I directed Colet to withdraw with the rest and the horses to the farther end of the square.

Dreading nothing so much as that I might lose the advantage of surprise, I put aside two of the men on the steps who would have questioned me, and strode boldly across the stone landing at the head of the flight. Here I found two doors facing me, and foresaw the possibility of error; but I was relieved from the burden of choosing by the sudden appearance at one of them of Bareilles himself. The place was lit only by an oil lamp, and, for a reason best known to himself, he did not look directly at me, but stood with his head half-turned as he said, "Well, Martin, is it done?"

I heard the dicers hold their hands to catch the answer, and in the silence a bottle in some unsteady hand clinked against a glass. Through the half-open door behind him it was possible to see a long table, laid and glittering with steel and plate; and all seemed to wait.

Parabere broke the spell. "We are late!" he said in a ringing voice, which startled the governor as if it had been the voice of doom. "But we could not have found you better prepared, it seems. Do you always sup as late as this?"

For a moment the villain could not speak, but leaned against the doorpost, with his cheeks gone white and his jaw fallen, the most pitiable spectacle to be conceived. I affected to see nothing, however, but went by him easily, and into the room, drawing off my gauntlets as entered. The dicers, from their seats beside a table on the hearth, gazed at me, turned to stone. I took up a glass, filled it, and drank it off. "Now I am better!" I said. "But this is not the warmest of welcomes, M. de Bareilles."

He muttered something, looking fearfully from one to another of us; and, his hand shaking, filled a glass and pledged me. The wine gave him courage and impudence: he began to speak; and though his hurried sentences and excited manner must have betrayed him to the least suspicious, we pretended to see nothing, but rather to congratulate ourselves on his late hours and timely preparations. And certainly nothing could have seemed more cheerful in comparison with the squalid inn and miry road from which we came than this smiling feast; if death had not seemed to my eyes to lurk behind it.

"I thought it likely that you would lie at Saury," he said, with a ghastly smile.

"And yet made this preparation for us?" I answered politely, yet letting a little of my real mind be seen. "Well, as a fact, M. Bareilles, save for one thing we should have lain there."

"And that thing?" he asked, his tongue almost failing him as he put the question.

"The fact that you have a villain in your company," I answered.

"What?" he stammered.

"A villain, M. le Capitaine Martin," I continued sternly. "You sent him out this morning against the Great Band; instead, he took it upon him to lay a plot for me, from which I have only narrowly escaped."

"Martin?"

"Yes, M. de Bareilles, Martin!" I answered roundly, fixing him with my eyes; while Parabere went quietly to the door, and stood by it. "If I am not mistaken, I hear him at this moment dismounting below. Let us understand one another therefore, I propose to sup with you, but I shall not sit down until he hangs."

It would be useless for me to attempt to paint the mixture of horror, perplexity, and shame which distorted Bareilles' countenance as I spoke these words. While Parabere's attitude and my demeanour gave him clearly to understand that we suspected the truth, if we did not know it, our coolness and the very nature of my demand imposed upon his fears and led him to believe that we had a regiment at our call. He knew, too, that that which might be done in a ruined hamlet might not be done in the square at Gueret; and his knees trembled under him. He muttered that he did not understand; that we must be mistaken. What evidence had we?

"The best!" I answered grimly. "If you wish to hear it, I will send for it; but witnesses have sometimes loose tongues, Bareilles, and he may not stop at the Capitaine Martin."

He started and glared at me. From me his eyes passed to Parabere; then he shuddered, and looked down at the table. As he leaned against it, I heard the glasses tinkling softly. At last he muttered that the man must have a trial.

I shrugged my shoulders, and would have answered that that was his business; but at the moment a heavy step rang on the stone steps, the door was flung hastily open, and a dark-complexioned man came in with his hat on. The stranger was splashed to the chin, and his face wore an expression of savage annoyance; but this gave place the instant he saw us to one of intense surprise, while the words he had had on his lips died away, and he stood nonplussed. I turned to M. de Bareilles.

"Who is this?" I said harshly.

"One of my lieutenants," he answered in a stifled tone.

"M. le Capitaine Martin?"

"The same," he answered.

"Very well," I replied. "You have heard my terms."

He stood clutching the table, and in the bright light of the candles that burned on it his face was horrible. Still he managed to speak. "M. le Capitaine, call four men," he muttered.

"Monsieur?" the Captain answered.

"Call four men—four of your men," Bareilles repeated with an effort.

The Captain turned and went downstairs in amazement, returning immediately after with four troopers at his heels.

Bareilles' face was ghastly. "Take M. le Capitaine's sword," he said to them.

The Captain's jaw fell, and, stepping back a pace, he looked from one to another. But all were silent; he found every eye upon him, and, doubtful and taken by surprise, he unbuckled his sword and flung it with an oath upon the floor.

"To the garden with him!" Bareilles continued, hoarsely. "Quick! Take him! I will send you your orders."

They laid hands on the man mechanically, and, unnerved by the suddenness of the affair, the silence, and the presence of so many strangers,—ignorant, too, what was doing or what was meant, he went unresisting. They marched him out heavily; the door closed behind them; we stood waiting. The glittering table, the lights, the arrested dicers, all the trivial preparations for a carouse that at another time must have given a cheerful aspect to the room, produced instead the most sombre impression. I waited, but, seeing that Bareilles did not move, I struck the table with my gauntlet. "The order!" I said, sharply; "the order!"

He slunk to a table in a corner where there was ink, and scrawled it. I took it from his hand, and, giving it to Boisrueil, "Take it," I said, "and the three men on the landing, and see the order carried out. When it is over, come and tell me."

He took the order and disappeared, La Font after him. I remained in the room with Parabere, Bareilles, and the dicers. The minutes passed slowly, no one speaking; Bareilles standing with his head sunk on his breast, and a look of utter despair on his countenance. At length Boisrueil and La Font returned. The former nodded.

"Very well," I said. "Then let us sup, gentlemen. Come, M. de Bareilles, your place is at the head of the table. Parabere, sit here. Gentlemen, I have not the honour of knowing you, but here are places."

And we supped; but not all with the same appetite. Bareilles, silent, despairing, a prey to the bitterest remorse, sat low in his chair, and, if I read his face aright, had no thought but of vengeance. But, assured that by forcing him to that which must for ever render him odious—and particularly among his inferiors—I had sapped his authority at the root, I took care only that he should not leave us. I directed Colet to unsaddle and bivouac in the garden, and myself lay all night with Parabere and Bareilles in the room in which we had supped, Boisrueil and La Font taking turns to keep the door.

To have betrayed too much haste to be gone might have proved as dangerous as a long delay; and our horses needed rest. But an hour before noon next day I gave the order and we mounted in the square, in the presence of a mixed mob of soldiers and townsfolk, whom it needed but a spark to kindle. I took care that that spark should be wanting, however; and to that end I compelled Bareilles to mount and ride with us as far as Saury. Here, where I found the inn burned and the woman murdered, I should have done no more than justice had I hung him as well; and I think that he half expected it. But reflecting that he had a score of relations in Poitou who might give trouble, and, besides that, his position called for some degree of consideration, I parted with him gravely, and hastened to put as many leagues between us as possible. That night

we slept at Crozant, and the next at St. Gaultier.

It was chiefly in consequence of the observations I made during this journey that Henry, in the following October, marched into the Limousin with a considerable force and received the submission of the governors. The details of that expedition, in the course of which he put to death ten or twelve of the more disorderly, will be found in another place. It remains for me only to add here that Bareilles was not of them. He escaped a fate he richly deserved by flying betimes with Bassignac to Sedan. Of his ultimate fate I know nothing; but a week after my return to the Arsenal, a man called on me who turned out to be the astrologer. I gave him fifty crowns.

VIII.

THE OPEN SHUTTER.

Few are ignorant of that weakness of the vulgar which leads them to admire in the great not so much the qualities which deserve admiration as those which, in the eyes of the better-informed, are defects; so that the amours of Caesar, the clock-making of Charles, and the jests of Coligny are more in the mouths of men than their statesmanship or valour. For one thing commendable, two that are diverting are told; and for one man who in these days recalls the thousand great and wise deeds of the late King a thousand remember his occasional freaks, the duel he would have fought, or his habit of visiting the streets of Paris by night and in disguise. That this last has been much exaggerated, I can myself bear witness; for though Varenne or Coquet, the Master of the Household, were his usual companions on these occasions, he seldom failed to confess to me after the event, and more than once I accompanied him.

If I remember rightly, it was in April or May of this year, 1606, and consequently a few days after his return from Sedan, that he surprised me one night as I sat at supper, and, requesting me to dismiss my servants, let me know that he was in a flighty mood; and that nothing would content him but to play the Caliph in my company. I was not too willing, for I did not fail to recognise the risk to which these expeditions exposed his person; but, in the end, I consented, making only the condition that Maignan should follow us at a distance. This he conceded, and I sent for two plain suits, and we dressed in my closet. The King, delighted with the frolic, was in his wildest mood. He uttered an infinity of jests, and cut a thousand absurd antics; and, rallying me on my gravity, soon came near to making me repent of the easiness which had led me to fall in with his humour.

However, it was too late to retreat, and in a moment we were standing in the street. It would not have surprised me if he had celebrated his freedom by some noisy extravagance there; but he refrained, and contented himself—while Maignan locked the postern behind us—with cocking his hat and lugging forward his sword, and assuming an air of whimsical recklessness, as if an adventure were to be instantly expected.

But the moon had not yet risen, the night was dark, and for some time we met with nothing more diverting than a stumble over a dead dog, a word with a forward wench, or a narrow escape from one of those liquid douches that render the streets perilous for common folk and do not spare the greatest. Naturally, I began to tire, and wished myself with all my heart back at the Arsenal; but Henry, whose spirits a spice of danger never failed to raise, found a hundred things to be merry over, and some of which he made a great tale of afterwards. He would go on; and presently, in the Rue de la Pourpointerie, which we entered as the clocks struck the hour before midnight, his persistence was rewarded.

By that time the moon had risen; but, naturally, few were abroad so late, and such as were to be seen belonged to a class among whom even Henry did not care to seek adventures. Our astonishment was great therefore when, half-way down the street—a street of tall, mean houses neither better nor much worse than others in that quarter—we saw, standing in the moonlight at an open door, a boy about seven years old.

The King saw him first, and, pressing my arm, stood still. On the instant the child, who had probably seen us before we saw him, advanced into the road to us. "Messieurs," he said, standing up boldly before us and looking at us without fear, "my father is ill, and I cannot close the shutter."

The boy's manner, full of self-possession, and his tone, remarkable at his age, took us so completely by surprise—to say nothing of the late hour and the deserted street, which gave these things their full effect—that for a moment neither of us answered. Then the King spoke. "Indeed, M. l'Empereur," he said gravely; "and where is the shutter?"

The boy pointed to an open shutter at the top of the house behind him.

"Ah!" Henry said. "And you wish us to close it?"

"If you please, messieurs."

"We do please," Henry replied, saluting him with mock reverence. "You may consider the shutter closed. Lead on, Monsieur; we follow."

For the first time the boy looked doubtful; but he turned without saying anything, and passing through the doorway, was in an instant lost in the pitchy darkness of the entry. I laid my hand on the King's arm, and tried to induce him not to follow; fearing much that this might be some new thieves' trap, leading nowhither save to the POIRE D'ANGOISSE and the poniard. But the attempt was hopeless from the first; he broke from me and entered, and I followed him.

We groped for the balustrade and found it, and began to ascend, guided by the boy's voice; who kept a little before us, saying continually, "This way, messieurs; this way!" His words had so much the sound of a signal, and the staircase was so dark and ill-smelling, that, expecting every moment to be seized or to have a knife in my back, I found it almost interminable. At last, however, a gleam of light appeared above us, the boy opened a door, and we found ourselves standing on a mean, narrow landing, the walls of which had once been whitewashed. The child signed to us to enter, and we followed him into a bare attic, where our heads nearly touched the ceiling.

"Messieurs, the air is keen," he said in a curiously formal tone. "Will you please to close the shutter?"

The King, amused and full of wonder, looked round. The room contained little besides a table, a stool, and a lamp standing in a basin on the floor; but an alcove, curtained with black, dingy hangings, broke one wall. "Your father lies there?" Henry said, pointing to it.

"Yes, monsieur."

"He feels the cold?"

"Yes, monsieur. Will you please to close the shutter?"

I went to it, and, leaning out, managed, with a little difficulty, to comply. Meanwhile, the King, gazing curiously at the curtains, gradually approached the alcove. He hesitated long, he told me afterwards, before he touched the hangings; but at length, feeling sure that there was something more in the business than appeared, he did so. Drawing one gently aside, as I turned from the window, he peered in; and saw just what he had been led to expect—a huddled form covered with dingy bed-clothes and a grey head lying on a ragged, yellow pillow. The man's face was turned to the wall; but, as the light fell on him, he sighed and, with a shiver, began to move. The King dropped the curtain.

The adventure had not turned out as well as he had hoped; and, with a whimsical look at me, he laid a crown on the table, said a kind word to the boy, and we went out. In a moment we were in the street.

It was my turn now to rally him, and I did so without mercy; asking if he knew of any other beauteous damsel who wanted her shutter closed, and whether this was the usual end of his adventures. He took the jest in good part, laughing fully as loudly at himself as I laughed; and in this way we had gone a hundred paces or so very merrily, when, on a sudden, he stopped.

"What is it, sire?" I asked.

"Hola!" he said, "The boy was clean."

"Clean?"

"Yes; hands, face, clothes. All clean."

"Well, sire?"

"How could he be? His father in bed, no one even to close the shutter. How could he be clean?"

"But, if he was, sire?"

For answer Henry seized me by the arm, turned me round without a word, and in a moment was hurrying me back to the house. I thought that he was going thither again, and followed reluctantly; but twenty paces short of the door he crossed the street, and drew me into a doorway. "Can you see the shutter?" he said. "Yes? Then watch it, my friend."

I had no option but to resign myself, and I nodded. A moist and chilly wind, which blew through the street and penetrating our cloaks made us shiver, did not tend to increase my enthusiasm; but the King was proof even against this, as well as against the kennel smells and the tedium of waiting, and presently his persistence was rewarded. The shutter swung slowly open, the noise made by its collision with the wall coming clearly to our ears. A minute later the boy appeared in the doorway, and stood looking up and down.

"Well," the King whispered in my ear, "what do you make of that, my friend?"

I muttered that it must be a beggar's trick.

"They would not earn a crown in a month," he answered. "There must be something more than that at the bottom of it."

Beginning to share his curiosity, I was about to propose that we should sally out and see if the boy would repeat his overture to us, when I caught the sound of footsteps coming along the street. "Is it Maignan?" the King whispered, looking out cautiously.

"No, sire," I said. "He is in yonder doorway."

Before Henry could answer, the appearance of two strangers coming along the roadway confirmed my statement. They paused opposite the boy, and he advanced to them. Too far off to hear precisely what passed, we were near enough to be sure that the dialogue was in the main the same as that in which we had taken part. The men were cloaked, too, as were we, and presently they went in, as we had gone in. All, in fact, happened as it had happened to us, and after the necessary interval we saw and heard the shutter closed.

"Well," the King said, "what do you make of that?"

"The shutter is the catch-word, sire."

"Ay, but what is going on up there?" he asked. And he rubbed his hands.

I had no explanation to give, however, and shook my head; and we stood awhile, watching silently. At the end of five minutes the two men came out again and walked off the way they had come, but more briskly. Henry moreover, whose observation was all his life most acute, remarked that whatever they had been doing they carried away lighter hearts than they had brought. And I thought the same.

Indeed, I was beginning to take my full share of interest in the adventure; and in place of wondering, as before, at Henry's persistence, found it more natural to admire the keenness which he had displayed in scenting a mystery. I was not surprised, therefore, when he gripped my arm to gain my attention, and, as the window fell slowly open again, drew me quickly into the street, and hurried me across it and through the doorway of the house.

"Up!" he muttered in my ear. "Quickly and quietly, man! If there are to be other visitors, we will play the spy. But softly, softly; here is the boy!"

We stood aside against the wall, scarcely daring to breathe; and the child, guiding himself by the handrail, passed us in the dark without suspicion, and pattered on down the staircase. We remained as we were until we heard him cross the threshold, and then we crept up; not to the uppermost landing, where the light, when the door was opened, must betray us, but to that immediately below it. There we took our stand in the angle of the stairs and waited, the King, between amusement at the absurdity of our position and anxiety lest we should betray ourselves, going off now and again into stifled laughter, from which he vainly strove to restrain himself by pinching me.

I was not in so gay a mood myself, however, the responsibility of his safety lying heavy upon me; while the possibility that the adventure might prove no less tragical in the sequel than it now appeared comical, did not fail to present itself to my eyes in the darkest colours. When we had watched, therefore, five minutes more—which seemed to me an hour—I began to lose faith; and I was on the point of undertaking to persuade Henry to withdraw, when the voices of men speaking at the door below reached us, and told me that it was too late. The next moment their steps crossed the threshold, and they began to ascend, the boy saying continually, "This way, messieurs, this way!" and preceding them as he had preceded us. We heard them approach, breathing heavily, and but for the balustrade, by which I felt sure that they would guide themselves, and which stood some feet from our corner, I should have been in a panic lest they should blunder against us. But they passed safely, and a moment later the boy opened the door of the room above. We heard them go in, and without a second's hesitation we crept up after them, following them so closely that the door was scarcely shut before we were at it. We heard, therefore, what passed from the first: the child's request that they would close the shutter, their hasty compliance, and the silence, strange and pregnant, which followed, and which was broken at last by a solemn voice. "We have closed one shutter," it said, "but the shutter of God's mercy is never closed."

"Amen," a second person answered in a tone so distant and muffled that it needed no great wit to guess whence it came, or that the speaker was behind the curtains of the alcove. "Who are you?"

"The cure of St. Marceau," the first speaker replied.

"And whom do you bring to me?"

"A sinner."

"What has he done?"

"He will tell you."

"I am listening."

There was a pause on this, a long pause; which was broken at length by a third speaker, in a tone half sullen, half miserable. "I have robbed my master," he said.

"Of how much?"

"Fifty livres."

"Why?"

"I lost it at play."

"And you are sorry."

"I must be sorry," the man panted with sudden fierceness, "or hang!" Hidden though he was from us, there was a tremor in his voice that told a tale of pallid cheeks and shaking knees, and a terror fast rising to madness.

"He makes up his accounts to-morrow?"

"Yes."

Someone in the room groaned; it should have been the culprit, but unless I was mistaken the sound came through the curtains. A long pause followed. Then, "And if I help you," the muffled voice resumed, "will you swear to lead an honest life?"

But the answer may be guessed. I need not repeat the assurances, the protestations and vows of repentance, the cries and tears of gratitude which ensue; and to which the poor wretch, stripped of his sullen indifference, completely abandoned himself. Suffice it that we presently heard the clinking of coins, a word or two of solemn advice from the cure, and a man's painful sobbing; then the King touched my arm, and we crept down the stairs. I was for stopping on the landing where we had hidden ourselves before; but Henry drew me on to the foot of the stairs and into the street.

He turned towards home, and for some time did not speak. At length he asked me what I thought of it.

"In what way, sire?"

"Do you not think," he said in a voice of much emotion, "that if we could do what he does, and save a man instead of hanging him, it would be better?"

"For the man, sire, doubtless," I answered drily; "but for the State it might not be so well. If mercy became the rule and justice the exception—there would be fewer bodies at Montfaucon and more in the streets at daylight. I feel much greater doubt on another point."

Shaking off the moodiness that had for a moment overcome him, Henry asked with vivacity what that was.

"Who he is, and what is his motive?"

"Why?" the King replied in some surprise—he was ever of so kind a nature that an appeal to his feelings displaced his judgment. "What should he be but what he seems?"

"Benevolence itself?"

"Yes."

"Well, sire, I grant that he may be M. de Joyeuse, who has spent his life in passing in and out of monasteries, and has performed so many tricks of the kind that I could believe anything of him. But if it be not he—"

"It was not his voice," Henry said, positively.

"Then there is something here," I answered, "still unexplained. Consider the oddity of the conception, sire, the secrecy of the performance, the hour, the mode, all the surrounding circumstances! I can imagine a man currying favour with the basest and most dangerous class by such means. I can imagine a conspiracy recruited by such means. I can imagine this shibboleth of the shutter grown to a watchword as deadly as the 'TUEZ!' of '72. I can imagine all that, but I cannot imagine a man acting thus out of pure benevolence."

"No?" Henry said, thoughtfully. "Well, I think that I agree with you." and far from being displeased with my warmth (as is the manner of some sovereigns when their best friends differ from them), he came over to my opinion so completely as to halt and express his intention of

returning and probing the matter to the bottom. Midnight had gone, however; it would take some little time to retrace our steps; and with some difficulty I succeeded in dissuading him, promising instead to make inquiries on the morrow, and having learned who lived in the house, to turn the whole affair into a report, which should be submitted to him.

This amused and satisfied him, and, expressing himself well content with the evening's diversion—though we had done nothing unworthy either of a King or a Minister—he parted from me at the Arsenal, and went home with his suite.

It did not occur to me at the time that I had promised to do anything difficult; but the news which my agents brought me next day—that the uppermost floor of the house in the Rue Pourpointerie was empty—put another face upon the matter. The landlord declared that he knew nothing of the tenant, who had rented the rooms, ready furnished, by the week; and as I had not seen the man's face, there remained only two sources whence I could get the information I needed—the child, and the cure of St. Marceau.

I did not know where to look for the former, however; and I had to depend on the cure. But here I came to an obstacle I might easily have foreseen. I found him, though an honest man, obdurate in upholding his priest's privileges; to all my inquiries he replied that the matter touched the confessional, and was within his vows; and that he neither could, nor dared—to please anyone, or for any cause, however plausible—divulge the slightest detail of the affair. I had him summoned to the arsenal, and questioned him myself, and closely; but of all armour that of the Roman priesthood is the most difficult to penetrate, and I quickly gave up the attempt.

Baffled in the only direction in which I could hope for success, I had to confess my defeat to the King, whose curiosity was only piqued the more by the rebuff. He adjured me not to let the matter drop, and, suggesting a number of persons among whom I might possibly find the unknown, proposed also some theories. Of these, one that the benevolent was a disguised lady, who contrived in this way to give the rein at once to gallantry and charity, pleased him most; while I favoured that which had first occurred to me on the night of our sally, and held the unknown to be a clever rascal, who, to serve his ends, political or criminal, was corrupting the commonalty, and drawing people into his power.

Things remained in this state some weeks, and, growing no wiser, I was beginning to think less of the affair—which, of itself, and apart from a whimsical interest which the King took in it, was unimportant—when one day, stopping in the Quartier du Marais to view the works at the new Place Royale, I saw the boy. He was in charge of a decent-looking servant, whose hand he was holding, and the two were gazing at a horse that, alarmed by the heaps of stone and mortar, was rearing and trying to unseat its rider. The child did not see me, and I bade Maignan follow him home, and learn where he lived and who he was.

In an hour my equerry returned with the information I desired. The child was the only son of Fauchet, one of the Receivers-General of the Revenue; a man who kept great state in the largest of the old-fashioned houses in the Rue de Bethisy, where he, had lately entertained the King. I could not imagine anyone less likely to be concerned in treasonable practices; and, certain that I had made no mistake in the boy, I was driven for a while to believe that some servant had, perverted the child to this use. Presently, however, second thoughts, and the position of the father, taken, perhaps, with suspicions that I had for a long time entertained of Fauchet—in common with most of his kind—suggested an explanation, hitherto unconsidered. It was not an explanation very probable at first sight, nor one that would have commended itself to those who divide all men by hard and fast rules and assort them like sheep. But I had seen too much of the world to fall into this mistake, and it satisfied me. I began by weighing it carefully; I procured evidence, I had Fauchet watched; and, at length, one evening in August, I went to the Louvre.

The King was dicing with Fernandez, the Portuguese banker; but I ventured to interrupt the game and draw him aside. He might not have taken this well, but that my first word caught his attention.

"Sire," I said, "the shutter is open."

He understood in a moment. "St. Gris!" He exclaimed with animation. "Where? At the same house?"

"No, sire; in the Rue Cloitre Notre Dame."

"You have got him, then?"

"I know who he is, and why he is doing this."

"Why?" the King cried eagerly.

"Well, I was going to ask for your Majesty's company to the place," I answered smiling. "I will undertake that you shall be amused at least as well as here, and at a cheaper rate."

He shrugged his shoulders. "That may very well be," he said with a grimace. "That rogue Pimentel has stripped me of two thousand crowns since supper. He is plucking Bassompierre now."

Remembering that only that morning I had had to stop some necessary works through lack of means, I could scarcely restrain my indignation. But it was not the time to speak, and I contented myself with repeating my request. Ashamed of himself, he consented with a good grace, and bidding me go to his: closet, followed a few minutes later. He found me cloaked to the eyes, and with a soutane and priest's hat; on my arm. "Are those for me?" he said.

"Yes, sire."

"Who am I, then?"

"The cure of St. Germain."

He made a wry face. "Come, Grand Master," he said; "he died yesterday. Is not the jest rather grim?"

"In a good cause," I said equably.

He flashed a roguish look at me. "Ah!" he said, "I thought that that was a wicked rule which only we Romanists avowed. But, there; don't be angry. I am ready."

Coquet, the Master of the Household, let us out by one of the river gates, and we went by the new bridge and the Pont St. Michel. By the way I taught the King the role I wished him to play, but without explaining the mystery; the opportune appearance of one of my agents who was watching the end of the street bringing Henry's remonstrances to a close.

"It is still open?" I said.

"Yes, your excellency."

"Then come, sire," I said, "I see the boy yonder. Let us ascend, and I will undertake that before you reach the street again you shall be not only a wiser but a richer sovereign."

"St. Gris!" he answered with alacrity. "Why did you not say that before, and I should have asked no questions. On, on, in God's name, and the devil take Pimentel!"

I restrained the caustic jest that rose to my lips, and we proceeded in silence down the street. The boy, whom I had espied loitering in a doorway a little way ahead, as if the great bell above us which had just tolled eleven had drawn him out, peered at us a moment askance; and then, coming forward, accosted us. But I need not detail the particulars of a conversation which was almost word for word the same as that which had passed in the Rue de la Pourpointerie; suffice it that he made the same request with the same frank audacity, and that, granting it, we were in a moment following him up a similar staircase.

"This way, messieurs, this way!" he said; as he had on that other night, while we groped our way upwards in the dark. He opened a door, and a light shone out; and we entered a room that seemed, with its bare walls and rafters, its scanty stool and table and lamp, the very counterpart of that other room. In one wall appeared the dingy curtains of an alcove, closely drawn; and the shutter stood open, until, at the child's request, expressed in the same words, I went to it and closed it.

We were both so well muffled up and disguised, and the light of the lamp shining upwards so completely distorted the features, that I had no fear of recognition, unless the King's voice betrayed him. But when he spoke, breaking the oppressive silence of the room, his tone was as strange and hollow as I could wish.

"The shutter is closed," he said; "but the shutter of God's mercy is never closed!"

Still, knowing that this was the crucial moment, and that we should be detected now if at all, I found it; an age before the voice behind the curtains answered "Amen!" and yet another age before the hidden speaker continued "Who are you?"

"The cure of St. Germain," Henry responded.

The man behind the curtains gasped, and they were for a moment violently agitated, as if a hand seized them and let them go again. But I had reckoned that the unknown, after a pause of horror, would suppose that he had heard amiss and continue his usual catechism. And so it proved. In a voice that shook a little, he asked, "Whom do you bring to me?"

"A sinner," the King answered.

"What has he done?"

"He will tell you."

"I am listening," the unknown said.

The light in the basin flared up a little, casting dark shadows on the ceiling, and at the same moment the shutter, which I had failed to fasten securely, fell open with a grinding sound. One of

the curtains swayed a little in the breeze, "I have robbed my master," I said, slowly.

"Of how much?"

"A hundred and twenty thousand crowns."

The bed shook until the boards creaked under it; but this time no hand grasped the curtains. Instead, a strained voice—thick and coarse, yet differing from that muffled tone which we had heard before—asked, "Who are you?"

"Jules Fauchet."

I waited. The King, who understood nothing but had listened to my answers with eager attention, and marked no less closely the agitation which they caused in the unknown, leant forward to listen. But the bed creaked no more; the curtain hung still; even the voice, which at last issued from the curtains, was no more like the ordinary accents of a man than are those which he utters in the paroxysms of epilepsy. "Are you—sorry?" the unknown muttered—involuntarily, I think; hoping against hope; not daring to depart from a formula which had become second nature. But I could fancy him clawing, as he spoke, at his choking throat.

France, however, had suffered too long at the hands of that race of men, and I had been too lately vilified by them to feel much pity; and for answer I lifted a voice that to the quailing wretch must have been the voice of doom. "Sorry?" I said grimly. "I must be—or hang! For to-morrow the King examines his books, and the next day I—hang!"

The King's hand was on mine, to stop me before the last word was out; but his touch came too late. As it rang through the room one of the curtains before us was twitched aside, and a face glared out, so ghastly and drawn and horror-stricken, that few would have known it for that of the wealthy fermier, who had grown sleek and fat on the King's revenues. I do not know whether he knew us, or whether, on the contrary, he found this accusation, so precise, so accurate, coming from an unknown source, still more terrible than if he had known us; but on the instant he fell forward in a swoon.

"St. Gris!" Henry cried, looking on the body with a shudder, "you have killed him, Grand Master! It was true, was it?"

"Yes, sire," I answered. "But he is not dead, I think." And going to the window I whistled for Maignan, who in a minute came to us. He was not very willing to touch the man, but I bade him lay him on the bed and loosen his clothes and throw water on his face; and presently M. Fauchet began to recover.

I stepped a little aside that he might not see me, and accordingly the first person on whom his eyes lighted was the King, who had laid aside his hat and cloak, and taken the terrified and weeping child on his lap. M. Fauchet stared at him awhile before he recognised him; but at last the trembling man knew him, and tottering to his feet, threw himself on his knees, looking years older than when I had last seen him in the street.

"Sire," he said faintly, "I will make restitution."

Henry looked at him gravely, and nodded. "It is well," he said. "You are fortunate, M. Fauchet; for had this come to my ears in any other way I could not have spared you. You will render your accounts and papers to M. de Sully to-morrow, and according as you are frank with him you will be treated."

Fauchet thanked him with abject tears, and the King rose and prepared to leave. But at the door a thought struck him, and he turned. "How long have you done this?" he said, indicating the room by a gesture, and speaking in a gentler tone.

"Three years, sire," the wretched man answered.

"And how much have you distributed?"

"Fifteen hundred crowns, sire."

The King cast an indescribable look at me, wherein amusement, scorn, and astonishment were all blended. "St. Gris! man!" he said, shrugging his shoulders and drawing in his breath sharply, "you think God is as easily duped as the King! I wish I could think so."

He did not speak again until we were half-way back to the Louvre; when he opened his mouth to announce his intention of rewarding me with a tithe of the money recovered. It was duly paid to me, and I bought with it part of the outlying lands of Villebon—those, I mean, which extend towards Chartres. The rest of the money, notwithstanding all my efforts, was wasted here and there, Pimentel winning thirty crowns of the King that year. But the discovery led to others of a similar character, and eventually set me on the track of a greater offender, M. l'Argentier, whom I brought to justice a few months later.

IX.

THE MAID OF HONOUR.

In accordance with my custom I gave an entertainment on the last day of this year to the King and Queen; who came to the Arsenal with a numerous train, and found the diversions I had provided so much to their taste that they did not leave until I was half dead with fatigue, and like to be killed with complaisance. Though this was not the most splendid entertainment I gave that year, it had the good fortune to please; and in a different and less agreeable fashion is recalled to my memory by a peculiar chain of events, whereof the first link came under my eyes during its progress.

I have mentioned in an earlier part of these memoirs, a Portuguese adventurer who, about this time, gained large sums from the Court at play, and more than once compelled the King to have recourse to me. I had the worst opinion of this man, and did not scruple to express it on several occasions; and this the more, as his presumption fell little short of his knavery, while he treated those whom he robbed with as much arrogance as if to play with him were an honour. Holding this view of him, I was far from pleased when I discovered that the King had brought him to my house; but the feeling, though sufficiently strong, sank to nothing beside the indignation and disgust which I experienced when, the company having fallen to cards after supper, I found that the Queen had sat down with him to primero.

It did not lessen my annoyance, that I had, after my usual fashion, furnished the Queen with a purse for her sport; and in this way found myself reduced to stand by and see my good money pass into the clutches of this knave. Under the circumstances, and in my own house, I could do nothing; nevertheless, the table at which they sat possessed so strong a fascination for me that I several times caught myself staring at it more closely than was polite; and as to disgust at the unseemliness of such companionship was added vexation at my own loss, I might have gone farther towards betraying my feelings if a casual glance aside had not disclosed to me the fact that I did not stand alone in my dissatisfaction; but that, frivolous as the majority of the courtiers were, there was one at least among those present who viewed this particular game with distaste.

This person stood near the door, and fancying himself secured from observation, either by his position or his insignificance, was glowering on the pair in a manner that at another time must have cost him a rebuke. As it was, I found something friendly, as well as curious, in his fixed frown; and ignorant of his name, though I knew him by sight, wondered both who he was and what was the cause of his preoccupation.

On the one point I had no difficulty in satisfying myself. Boisrueil, who presently passed, told me that his name was Vallon; that he belonged to a poor but old family in the Cotentin, and that he had been only three months at court.

"Making his fortune, I suppose?" I said grimly. "He games?"

"No, your excellency."

"Is in debt?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"To whom does he pay his court, then?"

"To the King."

"And the Queen?"

"Not particularly—as far as I know, at least. But if you wish to know more, M. le Duc," Boisrueil continued, "I will—"

"No, no," I said peevishly. The Queen had just handed her last rouleau across the table, and was still playing. "Go, man, about your business; I don't want to spend the evening gossiping with you."

He went, and I dismissed the young fellow from my mind; only to find him five minutes later at my elbow. To youth and good looks he added a modest bearing that did not fail to enhance them and commend him to me; the majority of the young sparks of the day being wiser than their fathers. But I confess that I was not prepared for the stammering embarrassment with which he addressed me—nor, indeed, to be addressed by him at all.

"M. de Sully," he said, in a tone of emotion, "I beg you to pardon me. I am in great trouble, and I think that perhaps, stranger as I am, you may condescend to do me a service."

So many men appeal to a minister with some such formula on their lips, and at times with a

calculated timidity, that at the first blush of his request I was inclined to bid him come to me at the proper time; and to remove to another part of the room. But curiosity, playing the part of his advocate, found so much that was candid in his manner that I hesitated. "What is it?" I said stiffly.

"A very slight, if a very unusual, one," he muttered. "M. le Duc, I only want you to—"

"To?" for he stopped and seemed unable to go on.

"To supplement the present you have given to the Queen with this," he blurted out, his face pale with emotion; and he stealthily held out to me a green silk purse, through the meshes of which I saw the glint of gold. "M. de Sully," he continued, observing my hasty movement, "do not be offended! I know that you have done all that hospitality required. But I see that the Queen has already lost your gift, and that—"

"She is playing on credit?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

He said it simply, and as he spoke, he again pressed on me the purse. I took and weighed it, and calculated at a guess that it held fifty crowns. The sum astonished me. "Why, man," I said, "you are not mad enough to be in love with her Majesty?"

"No!" he cried, vehemently, yet with a gleam of humour in his eye. "I swear that it is not so. If you will do me this favour—"

It was a mad impulse that took me, but I nodded, and resolving to make good the money out of my own pocket should the case, when all was clear, seem to demand it, I went straight from him, and, crossing the floor, laid the purse near her Majesty's hand, with a polite word of regret that fortune had used her so ill, and a hope that this might be the means of recruiting her forces.

It would not have surprised me had she shown some signs of consciousness, and perhaps betrayed that she recognised the purse. But she contented herself with thanking me prettily, and almost before I had done speaking had her slender fingers among the coins. Turning, I found that Vallon had disappeared; so that all came to a sudden stop; and with the one and the other, I retired completely puzzled, and less able than before to make even a guess at the secret of the young man's generosity.

However, the King summoning me to him, there, for the time, was an end of the matter: and between fatigue and the duties of my position, I did not give a second thought to it that evening. Next morning, too, I was taken up with the gifts which it was my privilege as Master of the Mint to present to the King on New Year's Day, and which consisted this year of medals of gold, silver, and copper, bearing inscriptions of my own composition, together with small bags of new coins for the King, the Queen, and their attendants.

These I always made it a point to offer before the King rose; nor was this year an exception, for I found his Majesty still in bed, the Queen occupying a couch in the same chamber. But whereas it generally fell to me to arouse them from sleep, and be the first to offer those compliments which befitted the day, I found them on this occasion fully roused, the King lazily toying with his watch, the Queen talking fast and angrily, and at the edge of the carpet beside her bed Mademoiselle D'Oyley in deep disgrace. The Queen, indeed, was so taken up with scolding her that she had forgotten what day it was; and even after my entrance, continued to rate the poor girl so fiercely that I thought her present violence little less unseemly than her condescension of the night before.

Perhaps some trace of this feeling appeared in my countenance; for, presently, the King, who seldom failed to read my thoughts, tried to check her in a good-natured fashion. "Come, my dear," he said; "let that trembling mouse go. And do you hear what our good friend Sully has brought you? I'll be bound—"

"How your Majesty talks!" the Queen answered, pettishly. "As if a few paltry coins could make up for my jar! I'll be bound, for my part, that this idle wench was romping and playing with—"

"Come, come; you have made her cry enough!" the King interrupted—and, indeed, the girl was sobbing so passionately that a man could not listen without pain. "Let her go, I say, and do you attend to Sully. You have forgotten that it is New Year's Day—"

"A jar of majolica," the Queen cried, Utterly disregarding him, "worth your body and soul, you little slut!"

"Pooh! pooh!" the King said.

"Do you think that I brought it from Florence, all the way in my own—"

"Nightcap," the King muttered. "There, there, sweetheart," he continued, aloud, "let the girl go!"

"Of course! She is a girl," the Queen cried, with a sneer. "That is enough for you!"

"Well, madam, she is not the only one in the room," I ventured.

"Oh, of course, you are the King's echo!"

"Run away, little one," Henry said, winking to me to be silent.

"And consider yourself lucky," the Queen cried, venomously. "You ought to be whipped; and if I had you in my country, I would have you whipped for all your airs! San Giacomo, if you cross me, I will see to it!"

This was a parting thrust; for the girl, catching at the King's permission, had turned and was hurrying in a passion of tears to the door. Still, the Queen had not done. Mademoiselle had broken a jar; and there were other misdemeanours which her Majesty continued to expound. But in the end I had my say, and presented the medals, which were accepted by the King with his usual kindness, and by the Queen, when her feelings had found expression, with sufficient complaisance. Both were good enough to compliment me on my entertainment; but observing that the Queen quickly buried herself again in her pillows and was inclined to be peevish, I cut short my attendance on the plea of fatigue, and left them at liberty to receive the very numerous company who on this day pay their court.

Of these, the greater number came on afterwards, to wait on me; so that for some hours the large hall at the Arsenal was thronged with my friends, or those who called themselves by that name. But towards noon the stream began to fail; and when I sat down to dinner at that hour, I had reason to suppose that I should be left at peace. I had not more than begun my meal, however, when I was called from table by a messenger from the Queen.

"What is it?" I said, when I had gone to him. Had he come from the King, I could have understood it more easily.

"Her Majesty desires to know, your excellency, whether you have seen anything of Mademoiselle D'Oyley."

"I?"

"Yes, M. le Duc."

"No, certainly not. How should I?" I replied.

"And she is not here?" the man persisted.

"No!" I answered, angrily. "God bless the Queen, I know nothing of her. I am sitting at meat, and—"

The man interrupted me with protestations of regret, and, hastening to express himself thoroughly satisfied, retired with a crestfallen air. I wondered what the message meant, and what had come over the Queen, and whither the girl had gone. But as I made it a rule throughout my term of office to avoid, as far as possible, all participation in bed-chamber intrigues, I wasted little time on the matter, but returning to my dinner, took up the conversation where I had left it. Before I rose, however, La Trape came to me and again interrupted me. He announced that a messenger from his Majesty was waiting in the hall.

I went out, thinking it very probable that Henry had sent me a present; though it was his more usual custom on this day to honour me with a visit, and declare his generous intentions by word of mouth, when we had both retired to my library and the door was closed. Still, on one or two occasions he had sent me a horse from his stables, a brace of Indian fowl, a melon or the like, as a foretaste; and this I supposed to be the errand on which the man had come.

His first words disabused me. "May it please your excellency," he said, very civilly, "the King desires to be remembered to you as usual, and would learn whether you know anything of Mademoiselle D'Oyley."

"Of whom?" I cried, astonished.

"Of Mademoiselle D'Oyley, her Majesty's maid of honour."

"Not I, i'faith!" I said, drily. "I am no squire of dames, to say nothing of maids!"

"But his Majesty—"

"If he has sent that message," I replied, "has yet something to learn—that I do not interest myself in maids of honour or such frailties."

The man smiled. "I do not think," he began, "that it was his Majesty—"

"Sent the message?" I said. "No, but the Queen, I suppose."

On this he gave me to understand, in the sly, secretive manner such men affect, that it was so. I asked him then what all this ferment was about. "Has Mademoiselle D'Oyley disappeared?" I said, peevishly.

"Yes, your excellency. She was with the Queen at eight o'clock. At noon her Majesty desired her services, and she was not to be found."

"What?" I exclaimed. "A maid of honour is missing for three hours in the morning, and there is all this travelling! Why, in my young days, three nights might have—"

But discerning that he was little more than a youth, and could not; restrain a smile, I broke off discreetly, and contented myself with asking if there was reason to suppose that there was more than appeared in the girl's absence.

"Her Majesty thinks so," he answered.

"Well, in any case, I know nothing about it," I replied. "I am not hiding her. You may tell his Majesty that, with my service. Or I will write it."

He answered me, eagerly, that that was not necessary, and that the King had desired merely a word from me; and with that and many other expressions of regret, he went away and left me at leisure to go to the riding-school, where at this time of the year it was my wont to see the young men practise those manly arts, which, so far as I can judge, are at a lower ebb in these modern days of quips and quodlibets than in the stirring times of my youth. Then, thank God, it was held more necessary for a page to know his seven points of horsemanship than how to tie a ribbon, or prank a gown, or read a primer.

But the first day of this year was destined to be a day of vexation. I had scarcely entered the school, when M. de Varennes was announced. Instead of going to meet him I bade them bring him to me, and, on seeing him, bade him welcome to the sports. "Though," I said, politely overlooking his past history and his origin, "we did better in our times; yet the young fellows should be encouraged."

"Very true," he answered, suavely. "And I wish I could stay with you. But it was not for pleasure I came. The King sent me. He desires to know—"

"What?" I said.

"If you know anything of Mademoiselle D'Oyley. Between ourselves, M. le Duc—"

I looked at him in amazement. "Why," I said, "what on earth has the girl done now?"

"Disappeared," he answered.

"But she had done that before."

"Yes," he said, "and the King had your message. But—"

"But what?" I said sternly.

"He thought that you might wish to supplement it for his private use."

"To supplement it?"

"Yes. The truth is," Varennes continued, looking at me doubtfully, "the King has information which leads him to suppose that she may be here."

"She may be anywhere," I answered in a tone that closed his mouth, "but she is not here. And you may tell the King so from me!"

Though he had begun life as a cook, few could be more arrogant than Varennes on occasion; but he possessed the valuable knack of knowing with whom he could presume, and never attempted to impose on me. Apologising with the easy grace of a man who had risen in life by pleasing, he sat with me awhile, recalling old days and feats, and then left, giving me to understand that I might depend on him to disabuse the King's mind.

As a fact, Henry visited me that evening without raising the subject; nor had I any reason to complain of his generosity, albeit he took care to exact from the Superintendent of the Finances more than he gave his servant, and for one gift to Peter got two Pauls satisfied. To obtain the money he needed in the most commodious manner, I spent the greater part of two days in accounts, and had not yet settled the warrants to my liking, when La Trape coming in with candles on the second evening disturbed my secretaries. The men yawned discreetly; and reflecting that we had had a long day I dismissed them, and stayed myself only for the purpose of securing one or two papers of a private nature. Then I bade La Trape light me to my closet.

Instead, he stood and craved leave to speak to me. "About what, sirrah?" I said.

"I have received an offer, your excellency," he answered with a crafty look.

"What! To leave my service?" I exclaimed, in surprise.

"No, your excellency," he answered. "To do a service for another—M. Pimentel. The Portuguese gentleman stopped me in the street to-day, and offered me fifty crowns."

"To do what?" I asked.

"To tell him where the young lady with Madame lies; and lend him the key of the garden gate to-night."

I stared at the fellow. "The young lady with Madame?" I said.

He returned my look with a stupidity which I knew was assumed. "Yes, your excellency. The young lady who came this morning," he said.

Then I knew that I had been betrayed, and had given my enemies such a handle as they would not be slow to seize; and I stood in the middle of the room in the utmost grief and consternation. At last, "Stay here," I said to the man, as soon as I could speak. "Do not move from the spot where you stand until I come back!"

It was my almost invariable custom to be announced when I visited my wife's closet; but I had no mind now for such formalities, and swiftly passing two or three scared servants on the stairs, I made straight for her room, tapped and entered. Abrupt as were my movements, however, someone had contrived to warn her; for though two of her women sat working on stools near her, I heard a hasty foot flying, and caught the last flutter of a skirt as it disappeared through a second door. My wife rose from her seat, and looked at me guiltily.

"Madame," I said, "send these women away. Now," I continued when they had gone, "who was that with you?" She looked away dumbly.

"You do well not to try to deceive me, Madame," I continued severely. "It was Mademoiselle D'Oyley."

She muttered, not daring to meet my eye, that it was.

"Who has absented herself from the Queen's service," I answered bitterly, "and chosen to hide herself here of all places! Madame," I continued, with a severity which the sense of my false position amply justified, "are you aware that you have made me dishonour myself? That you have made me lie; not once, but three times? That you have made me deceive my master?"

She cried out at that, being frightened, that "she had meant no harm; that the girl coming to her in great grief and trouble—"

"Because the Queen had scolded her for breaking a china jar!" I said, contemptuously.

"No, Monsieur; her trouble was of quite another kind," my wife answered with more spirit than I had expected.

"Pshaw!" I exclaimed.

"It is plain that you do not yet understand the case," Madame persisted, facing me with trembling hardihood. "Mademoiselle D'Oyley has been persecuted for some time by the suit of a man for whom I know you, Monsieur, have no respect: a man whom no Frenchwoman of family should be forced to marry."

"Who is it?" I said curtly.

"M. Pimentel."

"Ah! And the Queen?"

"Has made his suit her own. Doubtless her Majesty," Madame de Sully continued with grimness, "who plays with him so much, is under obligations to him, and has her reasons. The King, too, is on his side, so that Mademoiselle—"

"Who has another lover, I suppose?" I said harshly.

My wife looked at me in trepidation. "It may be so, Monsieur," she said hesitating.

"It is so, Madame; and you know it," I answered in the same tone. "M. Vallon is the man."

"Oh!" she exclaimed with a gesture of alarm. "You know!"

"I know, Madame," I replied, with vigour, "that to please this love-sick girl you have placed me in a position of the utmost difficulty; that you have jeopardised the confidence which my master, whom I have never willingly deceived, places in me; and that out of all this I see only one way of escape, and that is by a full and frank confession, which you must make to the Queen."

"Oh, Monsieur," she said faintly.

"The girl, of course, must be immediately given up."

My wife began to sob at that, as women will; but I had too keen a sense of the difficulties into which she had plunged me by her deceit, to pity her over much. And, doubtless, I should have continued in the resolution I had formed, and which appeared to hold out the only hope of avoiding the malice of those enemies whom every man in power possesses—and none can afford to despise—if La Trape's words, when he betrayed the secret to me, had not recurred to my mind and suggested other reflections.

Doubtless, Mademoiselle had been watched into my house, and my ill-wishers would take the earliest opportunity of bringing the lie home to me. My wife's confession, under such circumstances, would have but a simple air, and believed by some would be ridiculed by more. It might, and probably would, save my credit with the King; but it would not exalt me in others' eyes, or increase my reputation as a manager. If there were any other way—and so reflecting, I thought of La Trape and his story.

Still I was half way to the door when I paused, and turned. My wife was still weeping. "It is no good crying over spilled milk, Madame," I said severely. "If the girl were not a fool, she would have gone to the Ursulines. The abbess has a stiff neck, and is as big a simpleton to boot as you are. It is only a step, too, from here to the Ursulines, if she had had the sense to go on."

My wife lifted her head, and looked at me eagerly; but I avoided her gaze and went out without more, and downstairs to my study, where I found La Trape awaiting me. "Go to Madame la Duchesse," I said to him. "When you have done what she needs, come to me in my closet."

He obeyed, and after an interval of about half an hour, during which I had time to mature my plan, presented himself again before me. "Pimentel had a notion that the young lady was here then?" I said carelessly.

"Yes, your excellency."

"Some of his people fancied that they saw her enter, perhaps?"

"Yes, your excellency."

"They were mistaken, of course?"

"Of course," he answered, dutifully.

"Or she may have come to the door and gone again?" I suggested.

"Possibly, your excellency."

"Gone on without being seen, I mean?"

"If she went in the direction of the Rue St. Marcel," he answered stolidly, "she would not be seen."

The convent of the Ursulines is in the Rue St. Marcel. I knew, therefore, that Madame had had the sense to act on my hint; and after reflecting a moment I continued, "So Pimentel wished to know where she was lodged?"

"That, and to have the key, your excellency."

"To-night?"

"Yes, your excellency."

"Well, you are at liberty to accept the offer," I answered carelessly. "It will not clash with my service." And then, as he stood staring in astonishment, striving to read the riddle, I continued, "By the way, are the rooms in the little Garden Pavilion aired? They may be needed next week; see that one of the women sleeps there to-night; a woman you can depend on."

"Ah, Monsieur!"

He said no more, but I saw that he understood; and bidding him be careful in following my instructions, I dismissed him. The line I had determined to take was attended by many uncertainties, however; and more than once I repented that I had not followed my first; instinct, and avowed the truth. A hundred things might fall out to frustrate my scheme and place me in a false position; from which—since the confidence of his sovereign is the breath of a minister, and as easily destroyed as a woman's reputation—I might find it impossible to extricate myself with credit.

I slept, therefore, but ill that night; and in conjunctures apparently more serious have felt less trepidation. But experience has long ago taught me that trifles, not great events, unseat the statesman, and that of all intrigues those which revolve round a woman are the most dangerous. I rose early, therefore, and repaired to Court before my usual hour, it being the essence of my plan to attack, instead of waiting to be attacked. Doubtless my early appearance was taken to

corroborate the rumour that I had made a false step, and was in difficulties; for scarcely had I crossed the threshold of the ante-chamber before the attitude of the courtiers caught my attention. Some who twenty-four hours earlier would have been only too glad to meet my eye and obtain a word of recognition, appeared to be absorbed in conversation. Others, less transparent or better inclined to me, greeted me with unnatural effusion. One who bore a grudge against me, but had never before dared to do more than grin, now scowled openly; while a second, perhaps the most foolish of all, came to me with advice, drew me with insistency into a niche near the door, and adjured me to be cautious.

"You are too bold," he said; "and that way your enemies find their opening. Do not go to the King now. He is incensed against you. But we all know that he loves you; wait, therefore, my friend, until he has had his day's hunting—he is just now booting himself and see him when he has ridden off his annoyance."

"And when my friends, my dear Marquis, have had time to poison his mind against me? No, no," I answered, wondering much whether he were as simple as he looked.

"But the Queen is with him now," he persisted, seizing the lappel of my coat to stay me, "and she will be sure to put in a word against you."

"Therefore," I answered drily, "I had better see his Majesty before the one word becomes two."

"Be persuaded," he entreated me. "See him now, and nothing but ill will come of it."

"Nothing but ill for some," I retorted, looking so keenly at him that his visage fell. And with that he let me go, and with a smile I passed through the door. The rumour had not yet gained such substance that the crowd had lost all respect for me; it rolled back, and I passed through it towards the end of the chamber, where the King was stooping to draw on one of his boots. The Queen stood not far from him, gazing into the fire with an air of ill-temper which the circle, serious and silent, seemed to reflect, I looked everywhere for the Portuguese, but he was not to be seen.

For a moment the King affected to be unaware of my presence, and even turned his shoulder to me; but I observed that he reddened, and fidgeted nervously with the boot which he was drawing on. Nothing daunted, therefore, I waited until he perforce discovered me, and was obliged to greet me. "You are early this morning," he said, at last, with a grudging air.

"For the best of reasons, sire," I answered hardily. "I am ill placed at home, and come to you for justice."

"What is it?" he said churlishly and unwillingly.

I was about to answer, when the Queen interposed with a sneer. "I think that I can tell you, sire," she said. "M. de Sully is old enough to know the adage, 'Bite before you are bitten.'"

"Madame," I said, respectfully but with firmness. "I know this only, that my house was last night the scene of a gross outrage; and by all I can learn it was perpetrated by one who is under your Majesty's protection."

"His name?" she said, with a haughty gesture.

"M. Pimentel."

The Queen began to smile. "What was this gross outrage?" she asked drily.

"In the course of last night he broke into my house with a gang of wretches, and bore off one of the inmates."

The Queen's smile grew broader; the King began to grin. Some of the circle, watching them closely, ventured to smile also. "Come, my friend," Henry said, almost with good humour, "this is all very well. But this inmate of yours—was a very recent one."

"Was, in fact, I suppose, the rebellious little wench of whom you knew nothing yesterday!" the Queen cried harshly, and with an air of open triumph. "There can be no stealing of stolen goods, sir; and if M. Pimentel, who had at least as much right as you to the girl—and more, for I am her guardian—has carried her off, you have small ground to complain."

"But, Madame," I said, with an air of bewilderment, "I really do not—it must be my fault, but I do not understand."

Two or three sniggered, seeing me apparently checkmated and at the end of my resources. And the King laughed out with kindly malice. "Come, Grand Master," he said, "I think that you do. However, if Pimentel has carried off the damsel, there, it seems to me, is an end of the matter."

"But, sire," I answered, looking sternly round the grinning circle, "am I mad, or is there some mystery here? I assured your Majesty yesterday that Mademoiselle D'Oyley was not in my house. I say the same to-day. She is not; your officers may search every room and closet. And for the

woman whom M. Pimentel has carried off, she is no more Mademoiselle D'Oyley than I am; she is one of my wife's waiting-maids. If you doubt me," I continued, "you have only to send and ask. Ask the Portuguese himself."

The King stared at me. "Nonsense!" he said, sharply. "If Pimentel has carried off anyone, it must be Mademoiselle D'Oyley."

"But it is not, sire," I answered with persistence. "He has broken into my house, and abducted my servant. For Mademoiselle, she is not there to be stolen."

"Let some one go for Pimentel," the King said curtly.

But the Portuguese, as it happened, was at the door even then, and being called, had no alternative but to come forward. His face and mien as he entered and reluctantly showed himself were more than enough to dissipate any doubts which the courtiers had hitherto entertained; the former being as gloomy and downcast as the latter was timid and cringing. It is true he made some attempt at first, and for a time, to face the matter out; stammering and stuttering, and looking piteously to the Queen for help. But he could not long delay the crisis, nor deny that the person he had so cunningly abducted was one of my waiting-women; and the moment that this confession was made his case was at an end, the statement being received with so universal a peal of laughter, the King leading, as at one and the same time discomfited him, and must have persuaded any indifferent listener that all, from the first, had been in the secret.

After that he would have spent himself in vain, had he contended that Mademoiselle D'Oyley was at my house; and so clear was this that he made no second attempt to do so, but at once admitting that his people had made a mistake, he proffered me a handsome apology, and desired the King to speak to me in his behalf.

This I, on my side, was pleased to take in good part; and having let him off easily with a mild rebuke, turned from him to the Queen, and informed her with much respect that I had learned at length where Mademoiselle D'Oyley had taken refuge.

"Where, sir?" she asked, eyeing me suspiciously and with no little disfavour.

"At the Ursulines, Madame," I answered,

She winced, for she had already quarrelled with the abbess without advantage. And there for the moment the matter ended. At a later period I took care to confess all to the King, and he did not fail to laugh heartily at the clever manner in which I had outwitted Pimentel. But this was not until the Portuguese had left the country and gone to Italy, the affair between him and Mademoiselle D'Oyley (which resolved itself into a contest between the Queen and the Ursulines) having come to a close under circumstances which it may be my duty to relate in another place.

X.

FARMING THE TAXES.

In the summer of the year 1608, determining to take up my abode, when not in Paris, at Villebon, where I had lately enlarged my property, I went thither from Rouen with my wife, to superintend the building and mark out certain plantations which I projected. As the heat that month was great, and the dust of the train annoying, I made each stage in the evening and on horseback, leaving my wife to proceed at her leisure. In this way I was able, by taking rough paths, to do in two or three hours a distance which her coaches had scarcely covered in the day; but on the third evening, intending to make a short cut by a ford on the Vaucouleurs, I found, to my chagrin, the advantage on the other side, the ford, when I reached it at sunset, proving impracticable. As there was every prospect, however, that the water would fall within a few hours, I determined not to retrace my steps; but to wait where I was until morning, and complete my journey to Houdan in the early hours.

There was a poor inn near the ford, a mere hovel of wood on a brick foundation, yet with two storeys. I made my way to this with Maignan and La Trape, who formed, with two grooms, my only attendance; but on coming near the house, and looking about with a curious eye, I remarked something which fixed my attention, and, for the moment, brought me to a halt. This was the spectacle of three horses, of fair quality, feeding in a field of growing corn, which was the only enclosure near the inn. They were trampling and spoiling more than they ate; and, supposing that they had strayed into the place, and the house showing no signs of life, I bade my grooms fetch them out. The sun was about setting, and I stood a moment watching the long shadows of the men as they plodded through the corn, and the attitudes of the horses as, with heads raised, they looked doubtfully at the newcomers.

Suddenly a man came round the corner of the house, and seeing us, and what my men were doing, began to gesticulate violently, but without sound. The grooms saw him too, and stood; and he ran up to my stirrup, his face flushed and sullen.

"Do you want to see us all ruined?" he muttered. And he begged me to call my men out of the corn.

"You are more likely to be ruined that way," I answered, looking down at him. "Why, man, is it the custom in your country to turn horses into the half-ripe corn?"

He shook his fist stealthily. "God forbid!" he said. "But the devil is within doors, and we must do his bidding."

"Ah!" I replied, my curiosity aroused "I should like to see him."

The boor shaded his eyes, and looked at me sulkily from under his matted and tangled hair. "You are not of his company?" he said with suspicion.

"I hope not," I answered, smiling at his simplicity. "But your corn is your own. I will call the men out." On which I made a sign to them to return. "Now," I said, as I walked my horse slowly towards the house, while he tramped along beside me, "who is within?"

"M. Gringuet," he said, with another stealthy gesture.

"Ah!" I said, "I am afraid that I am no wiser."

"The tax-gatherer."

"Oh! And those are his horses?" He nodded.

"Still, I do not see why they are in the corn?"

"I have no hay."

"But there is grass."

"Ay," the inn-keeper answered bitterly.

"And he said that I might eat it. It was not good enough for his horses. They must have hay or corn; and if I had none, so much the worse for me."

Full of indignation, I made in my mind a note of M. Gringuet's name; but at the moment I said no more, and we proceeded to the house, the exterior of which, though meagre, and even miserable, gave me an impression of neatness. From the inside, however, a hoarse, continuous noise was issuing, which resolved itself as we crossed the threshold into a man's voice. The speaker was out of sight, in an upper room to which a ladder gave access, but his oaths, complaints, and imprecations almost shook the house. A middle-aged woman, scantily dressed, was busy on the hearth; but perhaps that which, next to the perpetual scolding that was going on above, most took my attention was a great lump of salt that stood on the table at the woman's elbow, and seemed to be evidence of greater luxury—for the GABELLE had not at that time been reduced—than I could easily associate with the place.

The roaring and blustering continuing upstairs, I stood a moment in sheer astonishment. "Is that M. Gringuet?" I said at last.

The inn-keeper nodded sullenly, while his wife stared at me. "But what; is the matter with him?" I said.

"The gout. But for that he would have been gone these two days to collect at Le Mesnil."

"Ah!" I answered, beginning to understand. "And the salt is for a bath for his feet, is it?"

The woman nodded.

"Well," I said, as Maignan came in with my saddlebags and laid them on the floor, "he will swear still louder when he gets the bill, I should think."

"Bill?" the housewife answered bitterly, looking up again from her pots. "A tax-gatherer's bill? Go to the dead man and ask for the price of his coffin; or to the babe for a nurse-fee! You will get paid as soon. A tax-gatherer's bill? Be thankful if he does not take the dish with the sop!"

She spoke plainly; yet I found a clearer proof of the slavery in which the man held them in the perfect indifference with which they regarded my arrival—though a guest with two servants must have been a rarity in such a place—and the listless way in which they set about attending to my wants. Keenly remembering that not long before this my enemies had striven to prejudice me in the King's eyes by alleging that, though I filled his coffers, I was grinding the poor into the dust—and even, by my exactions, provoking a rebellion I was in no mood to look with an indulgent eye on those who furnished such calumnies with a show of reason. But it has never been my wont to

act hastily; and while I stood in the middle of the kitchen, debating whether I should order the servants to fling the fellow out, and bid him appear before me at Villebon, or should instead have him brought up there and then, the man's coarse voice, which had never ceased to growl and snarl above us, rose on a sudden still louder. Something fell on the floor over our heads and rolled across it; and immediately a young girl, barefoot and short-skirted, scrambled hurriedly and blindly down the ladder and landed among us.

She was sobbing, and a little blood was flowing from a cut in her lip; and she trembled all over. At sight of the blood and her tears the woman seemed to be transported. Snatching up a saucepan, she sprang towards the ladder with a gesture of rage, and in a moment would have ascended if her husband had not followed and dragged her back. The girl also, as soon as she could speak, added her entreaties to his, while Maignan and La Trape looked sharply at me, as if they expected a signal.

All this while, the bully above continued his maledictions. "Send that slut back to me!" he roared. "Do you think that I am going to be left alone in this hole? Send her back, or—" and he added half-a-dozen oaths of a kind to make an honest man's blood boil. In the midst of this, however, and while the woman was still contending with her husband, he suddenly stopped and shrieked in anguish, crying out for the salt-bath.

But the woman, whom her husband had only half-pacified, shook her fist at the ceiling with a laugh of defiance. "Shriek; ay, you may shriek, you wretch!" she cried. "You must be waited on by my girl, must you—no older face will do for you—and you beat her? Your horses must eat corn, must they, while we eat grass? And we buy salt for you, and wheaten bread for you, and are beggars for you! For you, you thieving wretch, who tax the poor and let the rich go free; who—"

"Silence, woman!" her husband cried, cutting her short, with a pale face. "Hush, hush; he will hear you!"

But the woman was too far gone in rage to obey. "What! and is it not true?" she answered, her eyes glittering. "Will he not to-morrow go to Le Mesnil and squeeze the poor? Ay, and will not Lescauts the corn-dealer, and Philippon the silk-merchant, come to him with bribes, and go free? And de Fonvelle and de Curtin—they with a DE, forsooth!—plead their nobility, and grease his hands, and go free? Ay, and—"

"Silence, woman!" the man said again, looking apprehensively at me, and from me to my attendants, who were grinning broadly. "You do not know that this gentleman is not—"

"A tax-gatherer?" I said, smiling. "No. But how long has your friend upstairs been here?"

"Two days, Monsieur," she answered, wiping the perspiration from her brow, and speaking more quietly. "He is talking of sending on a deputy to Le Mesnil; but Heaven send he may recover, and go from here himself!"

"Well," I answered, "at any rate, we have had enough of this noise. My servant shall go up and tell him that there is a gentleman here who cannot put up with a disturbance. Maignan," I continued, "see the man, and tell him that the inn is not his private house, and that he must groan more softly; but do not mention my name. And let him have his brine bath, or there will be no peace for anyone."

Maignan and La Trape, who knew me, and had counted on a very different order, stared at me, wondering at my easiness and complaisance; for there is a species of tyranny, unassociated with rank, that even the coarsest view with indignation. But the woman's statement, which, despite its wildness and her excitement, I saw no reason to doubt, had suggested to me a scheme of punishment more refined; and which might, at one and the same time, be of profit to the King's treasury and a lesson to Gringuet. To carry it through I had to submit to some inconvenience, and particularly to a night passed under the same roof with the rogue; but as the news that a traveller of consequence was come had the effect, aided by a few sharp words from Maignan, of lowering his tone, and forcing him to keep within bounds, I was able to endure this and overlook the occasional outbursts of spleen which his disease and pampered temper still drew from him.

His two men, who had been absent on an errand at the time of my arrival, presently returned, and were doubtless surprised to find a second company in possession. They tried my attendants with a number of questions, but without success; while I, by listening while I had my supper, learned more of their master's habits and intentions than they supposed. They suspected nothing, and at day-break we left them; and, the water having duly fallen in the night, we crossed the river without mishap, and for a league pursued our proper road. Then I halted, and despatching the two grooms to Houdan with a letter for my wife, I took, myself, the road to Le Mesnil, which lies about three leagues to the west.

At a little inn, a league short of Le Mesnil, I stopped, and instructing my two attendants in the parts they were to play, prepared, with the help of the seals, which never left Maignan's custody, the papers necessary to enable me to enact the role of Gringuet's deputy. Though I had been two or three times to Villebon, I had never been within two leagues of Le Mesnil, and had no reason to suppose that I should be recognised; but to lessen the probability of this I put on a plain suit belonging to Maignan, with a black-hilted sword, and no ornaments. I furthermore waited to

enter the town until evening, so that my presence, being reported, might be taken for granted before I was seen.

In a larger place my scheme must have miscarried, but in this little town on the hill, looking over the plain of vineyards and cornfields, with inn, market-house, and church in the square, and on the fourth side the open battlements, whence the towers of Chartres could be seen on a clear day, I looked to have to do only with small men, and saw no reason why it should fail.

Accordingly, riding up to the inn about sunset, I called, with an air, for the landlord. There were half-a-dozen loungers seated in a row on a bench before the door, and one of these went in to fetch him. When the host came out, with his apron twisted round his waist, I asked him if he had a room.

"Yes," he said, shading his eyes to look at me, "I have."

"Very well," I answered pompously, considering that I had just such an audience as I desired—by which I mean one that, without being too critical, would spread the news. "I am M. Gringuet's deputy, and I am here with authority to collect and remit, receive and give receipts for, his Majesty's taxes, tolls, and dues, now, or to be, due and owing. Therefore, my friend, I will trouble you to show me to my room."

I thought that this announcement would impress him as much as I desired; but, to my surprise, he only stared at me. "Eh!" he exclaimed at last, in a faltering tone, "M. Gringuet's deputy?"

"Yes," I said, dismounting somewhat impatiently; "he is ill with the gout and cannot come."

"And you—are his deputy?"

"I have said so."

Still he did not move to do my bidding, but continued to rub his bald head and stare at me as if I fascinated him. "Well, I am—I mean—I think we are full," he stammered at last, with his eyes like saucers.

I replied, with some impatience, that he had just said that he had a room; adding, that if I was not in it and comfortably settled before five minutes were up I would know the reason. I thought that this would settle the matter, whatever maggot had got into the man's head; and, in a way, it did so, for he begged my pardon hastily, and made way for me to enter, calling, at the same time, to a lad who was standing by, to attend to the horses. But when we were inside the door, instead of showing me through the kitchen to my room, he muttered something, and hurried away; leaving me to wonder what was amiss with him, and why the loungers outside, who had listened with all their ears to our conversation, had come in after us as far as they dared, and were regarding us with an odd mixture of suspicion and amusement.

The landlord remained long away, and seemed, from sounds that came to my ears, to be talking with someone in a distant room. At length, however, he returned, bearing a candle and followed by a serving-man. I asked him roughly why he had been so long, and began to rate him; but he took the words out of my mouth by his humility, and going before me through the kitchen—where his wife and two or three maids who were about the fire stopped to look at us, with the basting spoons in their hands—he opened a door which led again into the outer air.

"It is across the yard," he said apologetically, as he went before, and opening a second door, stood aside for us to enter. "But it is a good room, and, if you please, a fire shall be lighted. The shutters are closed," he continued, as we passed him, Maignan and La Trape carrying my baggage, "but they shall be opened. Hallo! Pierre! Pierre, there! Open these shut—"

On the word his voice rose—and broke; and in a moment the door, through which we had all passed unsuspecting, fell to with a crash behind us. Before we could move we heard the bars drop across it. A little before, La Trape had taken a candle from someone's hand to light me the better; and therefore we were not in darkness. But the light this gave only served to impress on us what the falling bars and the rising sound of voices outside had already told us—that we were outwitted! We were prisoners.

The room in which we stood, looking foolishly at one another, was a great barn-like chamber, with small windows high in the unplastered walls. A long board set on trestles, and two or three stools placed round it—on the occasion, perhaps, of some recent festivity—had for a moment deceived us, and played the landlord's game.

In the first shock of the discovery, hearing the bars drop home, we stood gaping, and wondering what it meant. Then Maignan, with an oath, sprang to the door and tried it—fruitlessly.

I joined him more at my leisure, and raising my voice, asked angrily what this folly meant. "Open the door there! Do you hear, landlord?" I cried.

No one moved, though Maignan continued to rattle the door furiously.

"Do you hear?" I repeated, between anger and amazement at the fix in which we had placed ourselves. "Open!"

But, although the murmur of voices outside the door grew louder, no one answered, and I had time to take in the full absurdity of the position; to measure the height; of the windows with my eye and plumb the dark shadows under the rafters, where the feebler rays of our candle lost themselves; to appreciate, in a word, the extent of our predicament. Maignan was furious, La Trape vicious, while my own equanimity scarcely supported me against the thought that we should probably be where we were until the arrival of my people, whom I had directed my wife to send to Le Mesnil at noon next day. Their coming would free us, indeed, but at the cost of ridicule and laughter. Never was man worse placed.

Winching at the thought, I bade Maignan be silent; and, drumming on the door myself, I called for the landlord. Someone who had been giving directions in a tone of great, consequence ceased speaking, and came close to the door. After listening a moment, he struck it with his hand.

"Silence, rogues!" he cried. "Do you hear? Silence there, unless you want your ears nailed to the post."

"Fool!" I answered. "Open the door instantly! Are you all mad here, that you shut up the King's servants in this way?"

"The King's servants!" he cried, jeering at us. "Where are they?"

"Here!" I answered, swallowing my rage as well as I might. "I am M. Gringuet's deputy, and if you do not this instant—"

"M. Gringuet's deputy! Ho! ho!" he said. "Why, you fool, M. Gringuet's deputy arrived two hours before you. You must get up a little earlier another time. They are poor tricksters who are too late for the fair. And now be silent, and it may save you a stripe or two to-morrow."

There are situations in which even the greatest find it hard to maintain their dignity, and this was one. I looked at Maignan and La Trape, and they at me, and by the light of the lanthorn which the latter held I saw that they were smiling, doubtless at the dilemma in which we had innocently placed ourselves. But I found nothing to laugh at in the position; since the people outside might at any moment leave us where we were to fast until morning; and, after a moment's reflection, I called out to know who the speaker on the other side was.

"I am M. de Fonvelle," he answered.

"Well, M. de Fonvelle," I replied, "I advise you to have a care what you do. I am M. Gringuet's deputy. The other man is an impostor."

He laughed.

"He has no papers," I cried.

"Oh, yes, he has!" he answered, mocking me. "M. Curtin has seen them, my fine fellow, and he is not one to pay money without warrant."

At this several laughed, and a quavering voice chimed in with "Oh, yes, he has papers! I have seen them. Still, in a case—"

"There!" M. Fonvelle cried, drowning the other's words. "Now are you satisfied—you in there?"

But M. Curtin had not done. "He has papers," he piped again in his thin voice.

"Still, M. de Fonvelle, it is well to be cautious, and—"

"Tut, tut! it is all right."

"He has papers, but he has no authority!" I shouted.

"He has seals," Fonvelle answered. "It is all right."

"It is all wrong!" I retorted. "Wrong, I say! Go to your man, and you will find him gone—gone with your money, M. Curtin."

Two or three laughed, but I heard the sound of feet hurrying away, and I guessed that Curtin had retired to satisfy himself. Nevertheless, the moment which followed was an anxious one, since, if my random shot missed, I knew that I should find myself in a worse position than before. But judging—from the fact that the deputy had not confronted us himself—that he was an impostor, to whom Gringuet's illness had suggested the scheme on which I had myself hit, I hoped for the best; and, to be sure, in a moment an outcry arose in the house and quickly spread. Of those at the door, some cried to their fellows to hearken, while others hastened off to see. Yet still a little time elapsed, during which I burned with impatience; and then the crowd came trampling back, all wrangling and speaking at once.

At the door the chattering ceased, and, a hand being laid on the bar, in a moment the door was thrown open, and I walked out with what dignity I might. Outside, the scene which met my eyes might have been, under other circumstances, diverting. Before me stood the landlord of the inn, bowing with a light in each hand, as if the more he bent his backbone the more he must propitiate me; while a fat, middle-aged man at his elbow, whom I took to be Fonvelle, smiled feebly at me with a chapfallen expression. A little aside, Curtin, a shrivelled old fellow, was wringing his hands over his loss; and behind and round these, peeping over their shoulders and staring under their arms, clustered a curious crowd of busybodies, who, between amusement at the joke and awe of the great men, had much ado to control their merriment.

The host began to mutter apologies, but I cut him short. "I will talk to you to-morrow!" I said, in a voice which made him shake in his shoes. "Now give me supper, lights, and a room—and hurry. For you, M. Fonvelle, you are an ass! And for the gentleman there, who has filled the rogue's purse, he will do well another time to pay the King his dues!"

With that I left the two—Fonvelle purple with indignation, and Curtin with eyes and mouth agape and tears stayed—and followed my host to his best room, Maignan and La Trape attending me with very grim faces. Here the landlord would have repeated his apologies, but my thoughts beginning to revert to the purpose which had brought me hither, I affected to be offended, that, by keeping all at a distance, I might the more easily preserve my character.

I succeeded so well that, though half the town, through which the news of my adventure had spread, as fire spreads in tinder, were assembled outside the inn until a late hour, no one was admitted to see me; and when I made my appearance next morning in the market-place and took my seat, with my two attendants, at a table by the corn-measures, this reserve had so far impressed the people that the smiles which greeted me scarcely exceeded those which commonly welcome a tax-collector. Some had paid, and, foreseeing the necessity of paying again, found little that was diverting in the jest. Others thought it no laughing matter to pay once; and a few had come as ill out of the adventure as I had. Under these circumstances, we quickly settled to work, no one entertaining the slightest suspicion; and La Trape, who could accommodate himself to anything, playing the part of clerk, I was presently receiving money and hearing excuses; the minute acquaintance with the routine of the finances, which I had made it my business to acquire, rendering the work easy to me.

We had not been long engaged, however, when Fonvelle put in an appearance, and elbowing the peasants aside, begged to speak with me apart. I rose and stepped back with him two or three paces; on which he winked at me in a very knowing fashion, "I am M. de Fonvelle," he said. And he winked again.

"Ah!" I said.

"My name is not in your list."

"I find it there," I replied, raising a hand to my ear.

"Tut, tut! you do not understand," he muttered. "Has not Gringuet told you?"

"What?" I said, pretending to be a little deaf.

"Has not—"

I shook my head.

"Has not Gringuet told you?" he repeated, reddening with anger; and this time speaking, on compulsion, so loudly that the peasants could hear him.

I answered him in the same tone. "Yes," I said roundly. "He has told me; of course, that every year you give him two hundred livres to omit your name."

He glanced behind him with an oath. "Man, are you mad?" he gasped, his jaw falling. "They will hear you."

"Yes," I said loudly, "I mean them to hear me."

I do not know what he thought of this—perhaps that I was mad—but he staggered back from me, and looked wildly round. Finding everyone laughing, he looked again at me, but still failed to understand; on which, with another oath, he turned on his heel, and forcing his way through the grinning crowd, was out of sight in a moment.

I was about to return to my seat, when a pursy, pale-faced man, with small eyes and a heavy jowl, whom I had before noticed, pushed his way through the line, and came to me. Though his neighbours were all laughing he was sober, and in a moment I understood why.

"I am very deaf," he said in a whisper. "My name, Monsieur, is Philippon. I am a—"

I made a sign to him that I could not hear.

"I am the silk merchant," he continued pretty audibly, but with a suspicious glance behind

him. "Probably you have—"

Again I signed to him that I could not hear.

"You have heard of me?"

"From M. Gringuet?" I said very loudly.

"Yes," he answered in a similar tone; for, aware that deaf persons cannot hear their own voices and are seldom able to judge how loudly they are speaking, I had led him to this. "And I suppose that you will do as he did?"

"How?" I asked. "In what way?"

He touched his pocket with a stealthy gesture, unseen by the people behind him.

Again I made a sign as if I could not hear.

"Take the usual little gift?" he said, finding himself compelled to speak.

"I cannot hear a word," I bellowed. By this time the crowd were shaking with laughter.

"Accept the usual gift?" he said, his fat, pale face perspiring, and his little pig's eyes regarding me balefully.

"And let you pay one quarter?" I said.

"Yes," he answered.

But this, and the simplicity with which he said it, drew so loud a roar of laughter from the crowd as penetrated even to his dulled senses. Turning abruptly, as if a bee had stung him, he found the place convulsed with merriment; and perceiving, in an instant, that I had played upon him, though he could not understand how or why, he glared about him a moment, muttered something which I could not catch, and staggered away with the gait of a drunken man.

After this, it was useless to suppose that I could amuse myself with others. The crowd, which had never dreamed of such a tax-collector, and could scarcely believe either eyes or ears, hesitated to come forward even to pay; and I was considering what I should do next, when a commotion in one corner of the square drew my eyes to that quarter. I looked and saw at first only Curtin. Then, the crowd dividing and making way for him, I perceived that he had the real Gringuet with him—Gringuet, who rode through the market with an air of grim majesty, with one foot in a huge slipper and eyes glaring with ill-temper.

Doubtless Curtin, going to him on the chance of hearing something of the rogue who had cheated him, had apprised the tax-collector of the whole matter; for on seeing me in my chair of state, he merely grinned in a vicious way, and cried to the nearest not to let me escape. "We have lost one rogue, but we will hang the other," he said. And while the townfolk stood dumbfounded round us, he slipped with a groan from his horse, and bade his two servants seize me.

"And do you," he called to the host, "see that you help, my man! You have harboured him, and you shall pay for it if he escapes."

With that he hopped a step nearer; and then, not dreaming of resistance, sank with another groan—for his foot was immensely swollen by the journey—into the chair from which I had risen.

A glance showed me that, if I would not be drawn into an unseemly brawl, I must act; and meeting Maignan's eager eye fixed upon my face, I nodded. In a second he seized the unsuspecting Gringuet by the neck, snatched him up from the chair, and flung him half-a-dozen paces away. "Lie there," he cried, "you insolent rascal! Who told you to sit before your betters?"

The violence of the action, and Maignan's heat, were such that the nearest drew back affrighted; and even Gringuet's servants recoiled, while the market people gasped with astonishment. But I knew that the respite would last a moment only, and I stood forward. "Arrest that man," I said, pointing to the collector, who was grovelling on the ground, nursing his foot and shrieking foul threats at us.

In a second my two men stood over him. "In the King's name," La Trape cried; "let no man interfere."

"Raise him up," I continued, "and set him before me; and Curtin also, and Fonvelle, and Philippon; and Lescaut, the corn-dealer, if he is here."

I spoke boldly, but I felt some misgiving. So mighty, however, is the habit of command, that the crowd, far from resisting, thrust forward the men I named. Still, I could not count on this obedience, and it was with pleasure that I saw at this moment, as I looked over the heads of the crowd, a body of horsemen entering the square. They halted an instant, looking at the unusual concourse; while the townfolk, interrupted in the middle of the drama, knew not which way to stare. Then Boisrueil, seeing me, and that I was holding some sort of court, spurred his horse

through the press, and saluted me.

"Let half-a-dozen of your varlets dismount and guard these men," I said; "and do you, you rogue," I continued, addressing Gringuet, "answer me, and tell me the truth. How much does each of these knaves give you to cheat the King, and your master? Curtin first. How much does he give you?"

"My lord," he answered, pale and shaking, yet with a mutinous gleam in his eyes, "I have a right to know first before whom I stand."

"Enough," I thundered, "that it is before one who has the right to question you! answer me, villain, and be quick. What is the sum of Curtin's bribe?"

He stood white and mute.

"Fonville's?"

Still he stood silent, glaring with the devil in his eyes; while the other men whimpered and protested their innocence, and the crowd stared as if they could never see enough.

"Philippon's?"

"I take no bribes," he muttered.

"Lescaut's?"

"Not a denier."

"Liar!" I exclaimed. "Liar, who devour widows' houses and poor men's corn! Who grind the weak and say it is the King; and let the rich go free. Answer me, and answer the truth. How much do these men give you?"

"Nothing," he said defiantly.

"Very well," I answered; "then I will have the list. It is in your shoe."

"I have no list," he said, beginning to tremble.

"It is in your shoe," I repeated, pointing to his gouty foot. "Maignan, off with his shoe, and look in it."

Disregarding his shrieks of pain, they tore it off and looked in it. There was no list.

"Off with his stocking," I said roundly.

"It is there."

He flung himself down at that, cursing and protesting by turns. But I remembered the trampled corn, and the girl's bleeding face, and I was inexorable. The stocking was drawn off, not too tenderly, and turned inside out. Still no list was found.

"He has it," I persisted. "We have tried the shoe and we have tried the stocking, now we must try the foot. Fetch a stirrup-leather, and do you hold him, and let one of the grooms give him a dozen on that foot."

But at that he gave way; he flung himself on his knees, screaming for mercy.

"The list!" I said,

"I have no list! I have none!" he wailed.

"Then give it me out of your head. Curtin, how much?"

He glanced at the man I named, and shivered, and for a moment was silent. But one of the grooms approaching with the stirrup-leather, he found his voice. "Forty crowns," he muttered.

"Fonville?"

"The same."

I made him confess also the sums which he had received from Lescaut and Philippon, and then the names of seven others who had been in the habit of bribing him. Satisfied that he had so far told the truth, I bade him put on his stocking and shoe. "And now," I said to Boisrueil, when this was done, "take him to the whipping-post there, and tie him up; and see that each man of the eleven gives him a stripe for every crown with which he has bribed him—and good ones, or I will have them tied up in his place. Do you hear, you rascals?" I continued to the trembling culprits. "Off, and do your duty, or I will have your backs bare."

But the wretch, as cowardly as he had been cruel, flung himself down and crawled, sobbing

and crying, to my feet. I had no mercy, however. "Take him away," I said, "It is such men as these give kings a bad name. Take him away, and see you flay him well."

He sprang up then, forgetting his gout, and made a frantic attempt to escape. But in a moment he was overcome, hauled away, and tied up; and though I did not wait to see the sentence carried out, but entered the inn, the shrill screams he uttered under the punishment reached me, even there, and satisfied me that Fonvelle and his fellows were not; holding their hands.

It is a sad reflection, however, that for one such sinner brought to justice ten, who commit the same crimes, go free, and flourishing on iniquity, bring the King's service, and his officers, into evil repute.

XI.

THE CAT AND THE KING.

It was in the spring of the year 1609 that at the King's instance I had a suite of apartments fitted up for him at the Arsenal, that he might visit me, whenever it pleased him, without putting my family to inconvenience; in another place will be found an account of the six thousand crowns a year which he was so obliging as to allow me for this purpose. He honoured me by using these rooms, which consisted of a hall, a chamber, a wardrobe, and a closet, two or three times in the course of that year, availing himself of my attendants and cook; and the free opportunities of consulting me on the Great Undertaking, which this plan afforded, led me to hope that notwithstanding the envy of my detractors, he would continue to adopt it. That he did not do so, nor ever visited me after the close of that year, was due not so much to the lamentable event, soon to be related, which within a few months deprived France of her greatest sovereign, as to a strange matter that attended his last stay with me. I have since had cause to think that this did not receive at the time as much attention as it deserved; and have even imagined that had I groped a little deeper into the mystery I might have found a clue to the future as well as the past, and averted one more, and the last, danger from my beloved master. But Providence would not have it so; a slight indisposition under which I was suffering at the time rendered me less able, both in mind and body; the result being that Henry, who was always averse to the publication of these ominous episodes, and held that being known they bred the like in mischievous minds, had his way, the case ending in no more than the punishment of a careless rascal.

On the occasion of this last visit—the third, I think, that he paid me—the King, who had been staying at Chantilly, came to me from Lusarche, where he lay the intervening night. My coaches went to meet him at the gates a little before noon, but he did not immediately arrive, and being at leisure and having assured myself that the dinner of twelve covers, which he had directed to be ready, was in course of preparation, I went with my wife to inspect his rooms and satisfy myself that everything was in order.

They were in charge of La Trape, a man of address and intelligence, whom I have had cause to mention more than once in the course of these memoirs. He met me at the door and conducted us through the rooms with an air of satisfaction; nor could I find the slightest fault, until my wife, looking about her with a woman's eye for minute things, paused by the bed in the chamber, and directed my attention to something on the floor.

She stooped over it. "What is this?" she asked. "Has something been—"

"Upset here?" I said, looking also. There was a little pool of white liquid on the floor beside the bed.

La Trape uttered an exclamation of annoyance, and explained that he had not seen it before; that it had not been there five minutes earlier; and that he did not know how it came to be there now.

"What is it?" I said, looking about for some pitcher that might have overflowed; but finding none. "Is it milk?"

"I don't know, your excellency," he answered. "But it shall be removed at once."

"See that it is," I said. "Are the boughs in the fire-place fresh?" For the weather was still warm and we had not lit a fire.

"Yes, your excellency; quite fresh."

"Well, see to that, and remove it," I said, pointing to the mess. "It looks ill."

And with that the matter passed from my mind; the more completely as I heard at that

moment the sound of the King's approach, and went into the court-yard to receive him. He brought with him Roquelaure, de Vic, Erard the engineer, and some others, but none whom he did not know that I should be glad to receive. He dined well, and after dinner amused himself with seeing the young men ride at the ring, and even rode a course himself with his usual skill; that being, if I remember rightly, the last occasion on which I ever saw him take a lance. Before supper he walked for a time in the hall, with Sillery, for whom he had sent; and after supper, pronouncing himself tired, he dismissed all, and retired with me to his chamber. Here we had some talk on a subject that I greatly dreaded—I mean his infatuation for Madame de Conde; but about eleven o'clock he yawned, and, after thanking me for a reception which he said was quite to his mind, he bade me go to bed.

I was half way to the door when he called me back. "Why, Grand Master," he said, pointing to the little table by the head of the bed on which his night drinks stood, "you might be going to drown me. Do you expect me to drink all these in the night?"

"I think that there is only your posset, sire," I said, "and the lemon-water which you generally drink."

"And two or three other things?"

"Perhaps they have given your majesty some of the Arbois wine that you were good enough to —"

"Tut-tut!" he said, lifting the cover of one of the cups. "This is not wine. It may be a milk-posset."

"Yes, sire; very likely," I said drowsily.

"But it is not!" he answered, when he had smelled it. "It is plain milk! Come, my friend," he continued, looking drolly at me, "have you turned leech, or I babe is arms that you put such strong liquors before me? However, to show you that I have some childish tastes left, and am not so depraved as you have been trying to make me out for the last hour—I will drink your health in it. It would serve you right if I made you pledge me in the same liquor!"

The cup was at his lips when I sprang forward and, heedless of ceremony, caught his arm. "Pardon, sire!" I cried, in sudden agitation. "If that is milk, I gave no order that it should be placed here; and I know nothing of its origin. I beg that you will not drink it, until I have made some inquiry."

"They have all been tasted?" he asked, still holding the cup in his hand with the lid raised, but looking at it gravely.

"They should have been!" I answered. "But La Trape, whom I made answerable for that, is outside. I will go and question him. If you will wait, sire, a moment—"

"No," Henry said. "Have him here."

I gave the order to the pages who were waiting outside, and in a moment La Trape appeared, looking startled and uncomfortable. Naturally, his first glance was given to the King, who had taken his seat on the edge of the bed, but still held the cup in his hand. After asking the King's permission, I said, "What drinks did you place on the table, here, sirrah?"

He looked more uncomfortable at this, but he answered boldly enough that he had served a posset, some lemon water, and some milk.

"But orders were given only for the lemon-water and the posset," I said.

"True, your excellency," he answered. "But when I went to the pantry hatch, to see the under-butler carry up the tray, I found that the milk was on the tray; and I supposed that you had given another order."

"Possibly Madame de Sully," the King said, looking at me, "gave the order to add it?"

"She would not presume to do so, sire," I answered, sternly. "Nor do I in the least understand the matter. But at one thing we can easily arrive. You tasted all of these, man?"

La Trape said he had.

"You drank a quantity, a substantial quantity of each—according to the orders given to you? I persisted.

"Yes, your excellency."

But I caught a guilty look in his eyes, and in a gust of rage I cried out that he lied. "The truth!" I thundered, in a terrible voice. "The truth, you villain; you did not taste all?"

"I did, your excellency; as God is above, I did!" he answered. But he had grown pale, and he looked at the King in a terrified way.

"You did?"

"Yes!"

Yet I did not believe him, and I was about to give him the lie again, when the King intervened. "Quite so," he said to La Trape with a smile. "You drank, my good fellow, of the posset and the lemon water, and you tasted the milk, but you did not drink of it. Is not that the whole truth?"

"Yes, sire," he whimpered, breaking down. "But I—I gave some to a cat."

"And the cat is no worse?"

"No, sire."

"There, Grand Master," the King said, turning to me, "that is the truth, I think. What do you say to it?"

"That the rest is simple," I answered, grimly. "He did not drink it before; but he will drink it now, sire."

The King, sitting on the bed, laughed and looked at La Trape; as if his good-nature almost led him to interpose. But after a moment's hesitation he thought better of it, and handed me the cup. "Very well," he said; "he is your man. Have your way with him. After all, he should have drunk it."

"He shall drink it now, or be broken on the wheel!" I said. "Do you hear, you?" I continued, turning to him in a white heat of rage at the thought of his negligence, and the price it might have cost me. "Take it, and beware that you do not drop or spill it. For I swear that that shall not save you!"

He took the cup with a pale face, and hands that shook so much that he needed both to support the vessel. He hesitated, too, so long that, had I not possessed the best of reasons for believing in his fidelity, I should have suspected him of more than negligence. The shadow of his tall figure seemed to waver on the tapestry behind him; and with a little imagination I might have thought that the lights in the room had sunk. The soft whispering of the pages outside could be heard, and a stifled laugh; but inside there was not a sound. He carried the cup to his lips; then he lowered it again.

I took a step forward.

He recoiled a pace, his face ghastly. "Patience, excellency," he said, hoarsely. "I shall drink it. But I want to speak first."

"Speak!" the King answered.

"If there is death in it, I take God to witness that I know nothing, and knew nothing! There is some witch's work here it is not the first time that I have come across this devil's milk to-day! But I take God to witness I know nothing! Now it is here I will drink it, and—"

He did not finish the sentence, but drawing a deep breath raised the cup to his lips. I saw the apple in his throat rise and fall with the effort he made to swallow, but he drank so slowly that it seemed to me that he would never drain the cup. Nor did he, for when he had swallowed, as far as I could judge from the tilting of the cup, about half of the milk, Henry rose suddenly and, seizing it, took it from him with his own hand.

"That will do," the King said. "Do you feel ill?"

La Trape drew a trembling hand across his brow, on which the sweat stood in beads; but instead of answering he remained silent, gazing fixedly before him. We waited and watched, and at length, when I should think three minutes had elapsed, he changed his position for one of greater ease, and I saw his face relax. The unnatural pallor faded, and the open lips closed. A minute later he spoke. "I feel nothing, sire," he said.

The King looked at me drolly. "Then take five minutes more," he said. "Go, and stare at Judith there, cutting off the head of Holofernes"—for that was the story of the tapestry—"and come when I call you."

La Trape went to the other end of the chamber. "Well," the King said, inviting me by a sign to sit down beside him, "is it a comedy or a tragedy, my friend? Or, tell me, what was it he meant when he said that about the other milk?"

I explained, the matter seeming so trivial now that I came to tell it—though it; had doubtless contributed much to La Trape's fright—that I had to apologize.

"Still it is odd," the King said. "These drinks were not here, at that time, of course?"

"No, sire; they have been brought up within the hour."

"Well, your butler must explain it." And with that he raised his voice and called La Trape

back; who came, looking red and sheepish.

"Not dead yet?" the King said.

"No, sire."

"Nor ill?"

"No, sire."

"Then begone. Or, stay!" Henry continued. "Throw the rest of this stuff into the fire-place. It may be harmless, but I have no mind to drink it by mistake."

La Trape emptied the cup among the green boughs that filled the hearth, and hastened to withdraw. It seemed to be too late to make further inquiries that night; so after listening to two or three explanations which the King hazarded, but which had all too fanciful an air in my eyes, I took my leave and retired.

Whether, however, the scene had raised too violent a commotion in my mind, or I was already sickening for the illness I have mentioned, I found it impossible to sleep; and spent the greater part of the night in a fever of fears and forebodings. The responsibility which the King's presence cast upon me lay so heavily upon my waking mind that I could not lie; and long before the King's usual hour of rising I was at his door inquiring how he did. No one knew, for the page whose turn it was to sleep at his feet had not come out; but while I stood questioning, the King's voice was heard, bidding me enter. I went in, and found him sitting up with a haggard face, which told me, before he spoke, that he had slept little better than I had. The shutters were thrown wide open, and the cold morning light poured into the room with an effect rather sombre than bright; the huge figures on the tapestry looming huger from a drab and melancholy background, and the chamber presenting all those features of disorder that in a sleeping-room lie hid at night, only to show themselves in a more vivid shape in the morning.

The King sent his page out, and bade me sit by him. "I have had a bad night," he said, with a shudder. "Grand Master, I doubt that astrologer was right, and I shall never see Germany, nor carry out my designs."

Seeing the state in which he was, I could think of nothing better than to rally him, and even laugh at him. "You think so now, sire," I said. "It is the cold hour. By and by, when you have broken your fast, you will think differently."

"But, it may be, less correctly," he answered; and as he sat looking before him with gloomy eyes, he heaved a deep sigh. "My friend," he said, mournfully, "I want to live, and I am going to die."

"Of what?" I asked, gaily.

"I do not know; but I dreamed last night that a house fell on me in the Rue de la Ferronnerie, and I cannot help thinking that I shall die in that way."

"Very well," I said. "It is well to know that."

He asked me peevishly what I meant.

"Only," I explained, "that, in that case, as your Majesty need never pass through that street, you have it in your hands to live for ever."

"Perhaps it may not happen there—in that very street," he answered.

"And perhaps it may not happen yet," I rejoined. And then, more seriously, "Come, sire," I continued, "why this sudden weakness? I have known you face death a hundred times."

"But not after such a dream as I had last night," he said, with a grimace—yet I could see that he was already comforted. "I thought that I was passing along that street in my coach, and on a sudden, between St. Innocent's church and the notary's—there is a notary's there?"

"Yes, sire," I said, somewhat surprised.

"I heard a great roar, and something struck me down, and I found myself pinned to the ground, in darkness, with my mouth full of dust, and an immense beam on my chest. I lay for a time in agony, fighting for breath, and then my brain seemed to burst in my head, and I awoke."

"I have had such a dream, sire," I said, drily.

"Last night?"

"No," I said, "not last night."

He saw what I meant, and laughed; and being by this time quite himself, left that and passed to discussing the strange affair of La Trape and the milk. "Have you found, as yet, who was good

enough to supply it?" he asked.

"No, sire," I answered. "But I will see La Trape, and as soon as I have learned anything, your majesty shall know it."

"I suppose he is not far off now," he suggested. "Send for him. Ten to one he will have made inquiries, and it will amuse us."

I went to the door and, opening it a trifle, bade the page who waited send La Trape. He passed on the message to a crowd of sleepy attendants, and quickly, but not before I had gone back to the King's bedside, La Trape entered.

Having my eyes turned the other way, I did not at once remark anything. But the King did; and his look of astonishment, no less than the exclamation which accompanied it, arrested my attention. "St. Gris, man!" he cried. "What is the matter? Speak!"

La Trape, who had stopped just within the door, made an effort to do so, but no sound passed his lips; while his pallor and the fixed glare of his eyes filled me with the worst apprehensions. It was impossible to look at him and not share his fright, and I stepped forward and cried out to him to speak. "Answer the King, man," I said. "What is it?"

He made an effort, and with a ghastly grimace, "The cat is dead!" he said.

For a moment we were all silent. Then I looked at the King, and he at me, with gloomy meaning in our eyes. He was the first to speak. "The cat to whom you gave the milk?" he said.

"Yes, sire," La Trape answered, in a voice that seemed to come from his heart.

"But still, courage!" the King cried. "Courage, man! A dose that would kill a cat may not kill a man. Do you feel ill?"

"Oh, yes, sire," La Trape moaned.

"What do you feel?"

"I have a trembling in all my limbs, and ah—ah, my God, I am a dead man! I have a burning here—a pain like hot coals in my vitals!" And, leaning against the wall, the unfortunate man clasped his arms round his body and bent himself up and down in a paroxysm of suffering.

"A doctor! a doctor!" Henry cried, thrusting one leg out of bed. "Send for Du Laurens!" Then, as I went to the door to do so, "Can you be sick, man?" he asked. "Try!"

"No, no; it is impossible!"

"But try, try! when did this cat die?"

"It is outside," La Trape groaned. He could say no more.

I had opened the door by this time, and found the attendants, whom the man's cries had alarmed, in a cluster round it. Silencing them sternly, I bade one go for M. Du Laurens, the King's physician, while another brought me the cat that was dead.

The page who had spent the night in the King's chamber, fetched it. I told him to bring it in, and ordering the others to let the doctor pass when he arrived, I closed the door upon their curiosity, and went back to the King. He had left his bed and was standing near La Trape, endeavouring to hearten him; now telling him to tickle his throat with a feather, and now watching his sufferings in silence, with a face of gloom and despondency that sufficiently betrayed his reflections. At sight of the page, however, carrying the dead cat, he turned briskly, and we both examined the beast which, already rigid, with staring eyes and uncovered teeth, was not a sight to cheer anyone, much less the stricken man. La Trape, however, seemed to be scarcely aware of its presence. He had sunk upon a chest which stood against the wall, and, with his body strangely twisted, was muttering prayers, while he rocked himself to and fro unceasingly.

"It's stiff," the King said in a low voice. "It has been dead some hours."

"Since midnight," I muttered.

"Pardon, sire," the page, who was holding the cat, said; "I saw it after midnight. It was alive then."

"You saw it!" I exclaimed. "How? Where?"

"Here, your excellency," the boy answered, quailing a little.

"What? In this room?"

"Yes, excellency. I heard a noise about—I think about two o'clock—and his Majesty breathing very heavily, It was a noise like a cat spitting. It frightened me, and I rose from my pallet and

went round the bed. I was just in time to see the cat jump down."

"From the bed?"

"Yes, your excellency. From his Majesty's chest, I think."

"And you are sure that it was this cat?"

"Yes, sire; for as soon as it was on the floor it began to writhe and roll and bite itself, with all its fur on end, like a mad cat. Then it flew to the door and tried to get out, and again began to spit furiously. I thought that it would awaken the King, and I let it out."

"And then the King did awake?"

"He was just awaking, your excellency."

"Well, sire," I said, smiling, "this accounts, I think, for your dream of the house that fell, and the beam that lay on your chest."

It would have been difficult to say whether at this the King looked more foolish or more relieved. Whichever the sentiment he entertained, however, it was quickly cut short by a lamentable cry that drove the blood from our cheeks. La Trape was in another paroxysm. "Oh, the poor man!" Henry cried.

"I suppose that the cat came in unseen," I said; "with him last night, and then stayed in the room?"

"Doubtless."

"And was seized with a paroxysm here?"

"Such as he has now!" Henry answered; for La Trape had fallen to the floor. "Such as he has now!" he repeated, his eyes flaming, his face pale. "Oh, my friend, this is too much. Those who do these things are devils, not men. Where is Du Laurens? Where is the doctor? He will perish before our eyes."

"Patience, sire," I said. "He will come."

"But in the meantime the man dies."

"No, no," I said, going to La Trape, and touching his hand. "Yet, he is very cold." And turning, I sent the page to hasten the doctor. Then I begged the King to allow me to have the man conveyed into another room. "His sufferings distress you, sire, and you do him no good," I said.

"No, he shall not go!" he answered. "Ventre Saint Gris! man, he is dying for me! He is dying in my place. He shall die here."

Still ill satisfied, I was about to press him farther, when La Trape raised his voice, and feebly asked for me. A page who had taken the other's place was supporting his head, and two or three of my gentlemen, who had come in unbidden, were looking on with scared faces. I went to the poor fellow's side, and asked what I could do for him.

"I am dying!" he muttered, turning up his eyes. "The doctor! the doctor!"

I feared that he was passing, but I bade him have courage. "In a moment he will be here," I said; while the King in distraction sent messenger on messenger.

"He will come too late," the sinking man answered. "Excellency?"

"Yes, my good fellow," I said, stooping that I might hear him the better.

"I took ten pistoles yesterday from a man to get him a scullion's place; and there is none vacant."

"It is forgiven," I said, to soothe him.

"And your excellency's favourite hound, Diane," he gasped. "She had three puppies, not two. I sold the other."

"Well, it is forgiven, my friend. It is forgiven. Be easy," I said kindly.

"Ah, I have been a villain," he groaned. "I have lived loosely. Only last night I kissed the butler's wench, and—"

"Be easy, be easy," I said. "Here is the doctor. He will save you yet."

And I made way for M. Du Laurens, who, having saluted the King, knelt down by the sick man, and felt his pulse; while we all stood round, looking down on the two with grave faces. It seemed to me that the man's eyes were growing dim, and I had little hope. The King was the first

to break the silence. "You have hope?" he said. "You can save him?"

"Pardon, sire, a moment," the physician answered, rising from his knees. "Where is the cat?"

Someone brought it, and M. Du Laurens, after looking at it, said curtly, "It has been poisoned."

La Trape uttered a groan of despair. "At what hour did it take the milk?" the physician asked.

"A little before ten last evening," I said, seeing that La Trape was too far gone for speech.

"Ah! And the man?"

"An hour later."

Du Laurens shook his head, and was preparing to lay down the cat, which he had taken in his hands, when some appearance led him to examine it again and more closely. "Why what is this?" he exclaimed, in a tone of surprise, as he took the body to the window. "There is a large swelling under its chin."

No one answered.

"Give me a pair of scissors," he continued; and then, after a minute, when they had been handed to him and he had removed the fur, "Ha!" he said gravely, "this is not so simple as I thought. The cat has been poisoned, but by a prick with some sharp instrument."

The King uttered an exclamation of incredulity. "But it drank the milk," he said. "Some milk that—"

"Pardon, sire," Du Laurens answered positively. "A draught of milk, however drugged, does not produce an external swelling with a small blue puncture in the middle."

"What does?" the King asked, with something like a sneer.

"Ah, that is the question," the physician answered. "A ring, perhaps, with a poison-chamber and hollow dart."

"But there is no question of that here," I said. "Let us be clear. Do you say that the cat did not die of the milk?"

"I see no proof that it did," he answered. "And many things to show that it died of poison administered by puncture."

"But then," I answered, in no little confusion of thought, "what of La Trape?"

He turned, and with him all eyes, to the unfortunate equerry, who still lay seemingly moribund, with his head propped on some cushions. M. Du Laurens advanced to him and again felt his pulse, an operation which appeared to bring a slight tinge of colour to the fading cheeks. "How much milk did he drink?" the physician asked after a pause.

"More than half a pint," I answered.

"And what besides?"

"A quantity of the King's posset, and a little lemonade."

"And for supper? What did you have?" the leech continued, addressing himself to his patient.

"I had some wine," he answered feebly. "And a little Frontignac with the butler; and some honey-mead that the gipsy-wench gave me."

"The gipsy-wench?"

"The butler's girl, of whom I spoke."

M. Du Laurens rose slowly to his feet, and, to my amazement, dealt the prostrate man a hearty kick; bidding him at the same time to rise. "Get up, fool! Get up," he continued harshly, yet with a ring of triumph in his voice, "all you have got is the colic, and it is no more than you deserve. Get up, I say, and beg his Majesty's pardon!"

"But," the King remonstrated in a tone of anger, "the man is dying!"

"He is no more dying than you are, sire," the other answered. "Or, if he is, it is of fright. There, he can stand as well as you or I!"

And to be sure, as he spoke, La Trape scrambled to his feet, and with a mien between shame and doubt stood staring at us, the very picture of a simpleton. It was no wonder that his jaw fell and his impudent face burned; for the room shook with such a roar of laughter, at first low, and then as the King joined in it, swelling louder and louder, as few of us had ever heard, Though I

was not a little mortified by the way in which we had deceived ourselves, I could not help joining in the laugh; particularly as the more closely we reviewed the scene in which we had taken part, the more absurd seemed the jest. It was long before silence could be obtained; but at length Henry, quite exhausted by the violence of his mirth held up his hand. I seized the opportunity.

"Why, you rascal!" I said, addressing La Trape, who did not know which way to look, "where are the ten crowns of which you defrauded the scullion?"

"To be sure," the King said, going off into another roar. "And the third puppy?"

"Yes," I said, "you scoundrel; and the third puppy?"

"Ay, and the gipsy girl?" the King continued. "The butler's wench, what of her? And of your evil living? Begone, begone, rascal!" he continued, falling into a fresh paroxysm, "or you will kill US in earnest. Would nothing else do for you but to die in my chamber? Begone!"

I took this as a hint to clear the room, not only of La Trape himself but of all; and presently only I and Du Laurens remained with the King. It then appeared that there was still a mystery, and one which it behoved us to clear up; inasmuch as Du Laurens took the cat's death very seriously, insisting that it had died of poison administered in a most sinister fashion, and one that could not fail to recall to our minds the Borgian popes. It needed no more than this to direct my suspicions to the Florentines who swarmed about the Queen, and against whom the King had let drop so many threats. But the indisposition which excitement had for a time kept at bay began to return upon me; and I was presently glad to drop the subject; and retire to my own apartments, leaving the King to dress.

Consequently, I was not with him when the strange discovery which followed was made. In the ordinary course of dressing, one of the servants going to the fire-place to throw away a piece of waste linen, thought that he heard a rat stir among the boughs. He moved them, and in a moment a small snake crawled out, hissing and darting out its tongue. It was killed, and then it at once occurred to the King that he had the secret of the cat's death. He came to me hot-foot with the news, and found me with Du Laurens who was in the act of ordering me to bed.

I confess that I heard the story almost with apathy, so ill was I. Not so the physician. After examining the snake, which by the King's orders had been brought for my inspection, he pronounced that it was not of French origin. "It has escaped from some snake-charmer," he said.

The King seemed to be incredulous.

"I assure you that I speak the truth, sire," Du Laurens persisted.

"But how then did it come in my room?"

"That is what I should like to know, sire," the physician answered severely; "and yet I think that I can guess. It was put there, I fancy, by the person who sent up the milk to your chamber."

"Why do you say so?" Henry asked

"Because, sire, all snakes are inordinately fond of milk."

"Ah!" the King said slowly, with a change of countenance and a shudder which he could not repress; "and there was milk on the floor in the morning."

"Yes, sire; on the floor, and beside the head of your bed."

But at this stage I was attacked by a fit of illness so severe that I had to break in on the discussion, and beg the King to withdraw. The sickness increased on me during the day, and by noon I was prostrate, neither taking interest in anything, nor allowing others, who began to fear for my life, to divert their attention. After twenty-four hours I began to mend, but still several days elapsed before I was able to devote myself to business; and then I found that, the master-mind being absent, and the King, as always, lukewarm in the pursuit, nothing had been done to detect and punish the criminal.

I could not rest easy, however, with so abominable a suspicion attaching to my house; and as soon as I could bend my mind to the matter I began an inquiry. At the first stage, however, I came to an IMPASSE; the butler, who had been long in my service, cleared himself without difficulty, but a few questions discovered the fact that a person who had been in his department on the evening in question was now to seek, having indeed disappeared from that time. This was the gipsy-girl, whom La Trape had mentioned, and whose presence in my household seemed to need the more elucidation the farther I pushed the inquiry. In the end I had the butler punished, but though my agents sought the girl through Paris, and even traced her to Meaux, she was never discovered.

The affair, at the King's instance, was not made public; nevertheless, it gave him so strong a distaste for the Arsenal that he did not again visit me, nor use the rooms I had prepared. That later, when the first impression wore off, he would have done so, is probable; but, alas, within a few months the malice of his enemies prevailed over my utmost precautions, and robbed me of

the best of masters; strangely enough, as all the world now knows, at the corner of that very Rue de la Feronnerie which he had seen in his dream.

XII. AT FONTAINEBLEAU.

The passion which Henry still felt for Madame de Conde, and which her flight from the country was far from assuaging, had a great share in putting him upon the immediate execution of the designs we had so long prepared. Looking to find in the stir and bustle of a German campaign that relief of mind which the Court could no longer afford him, he discovered in the unhoped-for wealth of his treasury an additional incitement; and now waited only for the opening of spring and the Queen's coronation to remove the last obstacles that kept him from the field.

Nevertheless, relying on my assurances that all things were ready, and persuaded that the more easy he showed himself the less prepared would he find the enemy, he made no change in his habits; but in March, 1610, went, as usual, to Fontainebleau, where he diverted himself with hunting. It was during this visit that the Court credited him with seeing—I think, on the Friday before the Feast of the Virgin—the Great Huntsman; and even went so far as to specify the part of the forest in which he came upon it, and the form—that of a gigantic black horseman, surrounded by hounds—which it assumed The spectre had not been seen since the year 1598; nevertheless, the story spread widely, those who whispered it citing in its support not only the remarkable agitation into which the Queen fell publicly on the evening of that day, but also some strange particulars that attended the King's return from the forest; and, being taken up and repeated, and confirmed, as many thought, by the unhappy sequence of his death, the fable found a little later almost universal credence, so that it may now be found even in books.

As it happened, however, I was that day at Fontainebleau, and hunted with the King; and, favoured both by chance and the confidence with which my master never failed to honour me, am able not only to refute this story, but to narrate the actual facts from which it took its rise. And though there are some, I know, who boast that they had the tale from the King's own mouth, I undertake to prove either that they are romancers who seek to add an inch to their stature, or dull fellows who placed their own interpretation on the hasty words he vouchsafed such chattering.

As a fact, the King, on that day wishing to discuss with me the preparations for the Queen's entry, bade me keep close to him, since he had more inclination for my company than the chase. But the crowd that attended him was so large, the day being fine and warm—and comprised, besides, so many ladies, whose badinage and gaiety he could never forego—that I found him insensibly drawn from me. Far from being displeased, I was glad to see him forget the moodiness which had of late oppressed him; and beyond keeping within sight of him, gave up, for the time, all thought of affairs, and found in the beauty of the spectacle sufficient compensation. The bright dresses and waving feathers of the party showed to the greatest advantage, as the long cavalcade wound through the heather and rocks of the valley below the Apremonts; and whether I looked to front or rear—on the huntsmen, with their great horns, or the hounds straining in the leashes—I was equally charmed with a sight at once joyous and gallant, and one to which the calls of duty had of late made me a stranger.

On a sudden a quarry was started, and the company, galloping off pell-mell, with a merry burst of music, were in a moment dispersed, some taking this track, and others that, through the rocks and DEBRIS that make that part of the forest difficult. Singling out the King, I kept as near him as possible until the chase led us into the Apremont coverts, where, the trees growing thickly, and the rides cut through them being intricate, I lost him for a while. Again, however, I caught sight of him flying down a ride bordered by dark-green box-trees, against which his white hunting coat showed vividly; but now he was alone, and riding in a direction which each moment carried him farther from the line of the chase, and entangled him more deeply in the forest.

Supposing that he had made a bad cast and was in error, I dashed the spurs into my horse, and galloped after him; then, finding that he still held his own, and that I did not overtake him, but that, on the contrary, he was riding at the top of his speed, I called to him. "You are in error, sire, I think!" I cried. "The hounds are the other way!"

He heard, for he raised his hand, and, without turning his head, made me a sign; but whether of assent or denial, I could not tell. And he still held on his course. Then, for a moment, I fancied that his horse had got the better of him, and was running away; but no sooner had the thought occurred to me than I saw that he was spurring it, and exciting it to its utmost speed, so that we reached the end of that ride, and rushed through another and still another, always making, I did not fail to note, for the most retired part of the forest.

We had proceeded in this way about a mile, and the sound of the hunt had quite died away

behind us, and I was beginning to chafe, as well as marvel, at conduct so singular, when at last I saw that he was slackening his pace. My horse, which was on the point of failing, began, in turn, to overhaul his, while I looked out with sharpened curiosity for the object of pursuit. I could see nothing, however, and no one; and had just satisfied myself that this was one of the droll freaks in which he would sometimes indulge, and that in a second or two he would turn and laugh at my discomfiture, when, on a sudden, with a final pull at the reins, he did turn, and showed me a face flushed with passion and chagrin.

I was so taken aback that I cried out. "MON DIEU! sire," I said. "What is it? What is the matter?"

"Matter enough!" he cried, with an oath. And on that, halting his horse, he looked at me as if he would read my heart. "VENTRE DE SAINT GRIS!" he said, in a voice that made me tremble, "if I were sure that there was no mistake, I would—I would never see your face again!"

I uttered an exclamation.

"Have you not deceived me?" quoth he.

"Oh, sire, I am weary of these suspicions!" I answered, affecting an indifference I did not feel. "If your Majesty does not—"

But he cut me short. "Answer me!" he said harshly, his mouth working in his beard and his eyes gleaming with excitement. "Have you not deceived me?"

"No, sire!" I said.

"Yet you have told me day by day that Madame de Conde remained in Brussels?"

"Certainly!"

"And you still say so?"

"Most certainly!" I answered firmly, beginning to think that his passion had turned his brain. "I had despatches to that effect this morning."

"Of what date?"

"Three days gone. The courier travelled night and day."

"They may be true, and still she may be here to-day?" he said, staring at me.

"Impossible, sire!"

"But, man, I have just seen her!" he cried impatiently.

"Madame de Conde?"

"Yes, Madame de Conde, or I am a madman!" Henry answered, speaking a little more moderately. "I saw her gallop out of the patch of rocks at the end of the Dormoir—where the trees begin. She did not heed the line of the hounds, but turned straight down the boxwood ride; and, after that, led as I followed. Did you not see her?"

"No, sire," I said, inexpressibly alarmed—I could take it for nothing but fantasy—"I saw no one."

"And I saw her as clearly as I see you," he answered. "She wore the yellow ostrich-feather she wore last year, and rode her favourite chestnut horse with a white stocking. But I could have sworn to her by her figure alone; and she waved her hand to me."

"But, sire, out of the many ladies riding to-day—"

"There is no lady wearing a yellow feather," he answered passionately. "And the horse! And I knew her, man! Besides, she waved to me! And, for the others—why should they turn from the hunt and take to the woods?"

I could not answer this, but I looked at him in fear; for, as it was impossible that the Princess de Conde could be here, I saw no alternative but to think him smitten with madness. The extravagance of the passion which he had entertained for her, and the wrath into which the news of her flight with her young husband had thrown him, to say nothing of the depression under which he had since suffered, rendered the idea not so unlikely as it now seems. At any rate, I was driven for a moment to entertain it; and gazed at him in silence, a prey to the most dreadful apprehensions.

We stood in a narrow ride, bordered by evergreens, with which that part of the forest is planted; and but for the songs of the birds the stillness would have been absolute. On a sudden the King removed his eyes from me, and, walking his horse a pace or two along the ride, uttered a cry of joy.

He pointed to the ground. "We are right!" he said. "There are her tracks! Come! We will overtake her yet!"

I looked, and saw the fresh prints of a horse's shoes, and felt a great weight roll off my mind, for at least he had seen someone. I no longer hesitated to fall in with his humour, but, riding after him, kept at his elbow until he reached the end of the ride. Here, a vista opening right and left, and the ground being hard and free from tracks, we stood at a loss; until the King, whose eyesight was always of the keenest, uttered an exclamation, and started from me at a gallop.

I followed more slowly, and saw him dismount and pick up a glove, which, even at that distance, he had discerned lying in the middle of one of the paths. He cried, with a flushed face, that it was Madame de Conde's; and added: "It has her perfume—her perfume, which no one else uses!"

I confess that this so staggered me that I knew not what to think; but, between sorrow at seeing my master so infatuated and bewilderment at a riddle that grew each moment more perplexing, I sat gaping at Henry like a man without counsel. However, at the moment, he needed none, but, getting to his saddle as quickly as he could, he began again to follow the tracks of the horse's feet, which here were visible, the path running through a beech wood. The branches were still bare, and the shining trunks stood up like pillars, the ground about them being soft. We followed the prints through this wood for a mile and a half or more, and then, with a cry, the King darted from me, and, in an instant, was racing through the wood at break-neck speed.

I had a glimpse of a woman flying far ahead of us; and now hidden from us by the trunks and now disclosed; and could even see enough to determine that she wore a yellow feather drooping from her hat, and was in figure not unlike the Princess. But that was all; for, once started, the inequalities of the ground drew my eyes from the flying form, and, losing it, I could not again recover it. On the contrary, it was all I could do to keep up with the King; and of the speed at which the woman was riding, could best judge by the fact that in less than five minutes he, too, pulled-up with a gesture of despair, and waited for me to come abreast of him.

"You saw her?" he said, his face grim, and with something of suspicion lurking in it.

"Yes, sire," I answered, "I saw a woman, and a woman with a yellow feather; but whether it was the Princess—"

"It was!" he said. "If not, why should she flee from us?"

To that, again, I had not a word to say, and for a moment we rode in silence. Observing, however, that this last turn had brought us far on the way home, I called the King's attention to this; but he had sunk into a fit of gloomy abstraction, and rode along with his eyes on the ground. We proceeded thus until the slender path we followed brought up into the great road that leads through the forest to the kennels and the new canal.

Here I asked him if he would not return to the chase, as the day was still young.

"Mon Dieu, no!" he answered passionately. "I have other work to do. Hark ye, M. le Duc, do you still think that she is in Brussels?"

"I swear that she was there three days ago, sire!"

"And you are not deceiving me? If it be so, God forgive you, for I shall not!"

"It is no trick of mine, sire," I answered firmly.

"Trick?" he cried, with a flash of his eyes. "A trick, you say? No, VENTRE DE SAINT GRIS! there is no man in France dare trick me so!"

I did not contradict him, the rather as we were now close to the kennels, and I was anxious to allay his excitement; that it might not be detected by the keen eyes that lay in wait for us, and so add to the gossip to which his early return must give rise. I hoped that at that hour he might enter unperceived, by way of the kennels and the little staircase; but in this I was disappointed, the beauty of the day having tempted a number of ladies, and others who had not hunted, to the terrace by the canal; whence, walking up and down, their fans and petticoats fluttering in the sunshine, and their laughter and chatter filling the air, they were able to watch our approach at their leisure.

Unfortunately, Henry had no longer the patience and self-control needful for such a RENCONTRE. He dismounted with a dark and peevish air, and, heedless of the staring, bowing throng, strode up the steps. Two or three, who stood high in favour, put themselves forward to catch a smile or a word, but he vouchsafed neither. He walked through them with a sour air, and entered the chateau with a precipitation that left all tongues wagging.

To add to the misfortune, something—I forget what—detained me a moment, and that cost us dear. Before I could cross the terrace, Concini, the Italian, came up, and, saluting me, said that the Queen desired to speak to me.

"The Queen?" I said, doubtfully, foreseeing trouble.

"She is waiting at the gate of the farther court," he answered politely, his keen black eyes reverting, with eager curiosity, to the door by which the King had disappeared.

I could not refuse, and went to her. "The King has returned early, M. le Duc?" she said.

"Yes, madame," I answered. "He had a fancy to discuss affairs to-day, and we lost the hounds."

"Together?"

"I had the honour, Madame."

"You do not seem to have agreed very well?" she said, smiling.

"Madame," I answered bluntly, "his Majesty has no more faithful servant; but we do not always agree."

She raised her hand, and, with a slight gesture, bade her ladies stand back, while her face lost its expression of good-temper, and grew sharp and dark. "Was it about the Conde?" she said, in a low, grating voice. "No, madame," I answered; "it was about certain provisions. The King's ear had been grossly abused, and his Majesty led to believe—"

"Faugh!" she cried, with a wave of contempt, "that is an old story! I am sick of it. Is she still at Brussels?"

"Still, madame."

"Then see that she stops there!" her Majesty retorted, with a meaning look.

And with that she dismissed me, and went into the chateau. I proposed to rejoin the King; but, to my chagrin, I found, when I reached the closet, that he had already sent for Varennes, and was shut up with him. I went back to my rooms therefore, and, after changing my hunting suit and transacting some necessary business, sat down to dinner with Nicholas, the King's secretary, a man fond of the table, whom I often entertained. He kept me in talk until the afternoon was well advanced, and we were still at table when Maignan appeared and told me that the King had sent for me.

"I will go," I said, rising.

"He is with the Queen, your Excellency," he continued.

This somewhat surprised me, but I thought no evil; and, finding one of the Queen's Italian pages at the door waiting to conduct me, I followed him across the court that lay between my lodgings and her apartments. Two or three of the King's gentlemen were in the anteroom when I arrived, and Varennes, who was standing by one of the fire-places toying with a hound, made me a face of dismay; he could not speak, owing to the company.

Still this, in a degree, prepared me for the scene in the chamber, where I found the Queen storming up and down the room, while the King, still in his hunting dress, sat on a low chair by the fire, apparently drying his boots. Mademoiselle Galigai, the Queen's waiting-woman, stood in the background; but more than this I had not time to observe, for, before I had reached the middle of the floor, the Queen turned on me, and began to abuse me with a vehemence which fairly shocked me.

"And you!" she cried, "who speak so slow, and look so solemn, and all the time do his dirty work, like the meanest cook he has ennobled! It is well you are here! ENFIN, you are found out—you and your provisions! Your provisions, of which you talked in the wood!"

"MON DIEU!" the King groaned; "give me patience!"

"He has given me patience these ten years, sire!" she retorted passionately. "Patience to see myself flouted by your favourites, insulted and displaced, and set aside! But this is too much! It was enough that you made yourself the laughing-stock of France once with this madame! I will not have it again—no: though twenty of your counsellors frown at me!"

"Your Majesty seems displeased," I said. "But as I am quite in the dark—"

"Liar!" she cried, giving way to her fury. "When you were with her this morning! When you saw her! When you stooped to—"

"Madame!" the King said sternly, "if you forget yourself, be good enough to remember that you are speaking to French gentlemen, not to traders of Florence!"

She sneered. "You think to wound me by that!" she cried, breathing quickly. "But I have my grandfather's blood in me, sire; and no King of France—"

"One King of France will presently make your uncle of that blood sing small!" the King answered viciously. "So much for that; and for the rest, sweetheart, softly, softly!"

"Oh!" she cried, "I will go: I will not stay to be outraged by that woman's presence!"

I had now an inkling what was the matter; and discerning that the quarrel was a more serious matter than their every-day bickerings, and threatened to go to lengths that might end in disaster, I ignored the insult her Majesty had flung at me, and entreated her to be calm. "If I understand aright, madame," I said, "you have some grievance against his Majesty. Of that I know nothing. But I also understand that you allege something against me; and it is to speak to that, I presume, that I am summoned. If you will deign to put the matter into words—"

"Words!" she cried. "You have words enough! But get out of this, Master Grave-Airs, if you can! Did you, or did you not, tell me this morning that the Princess of Conde was in Brussels?"

"I did, madame."

"Although half an hour before you had seen her, you had talked with her, you had been with her in the forest?"

"But I had not, madame!"

"What?" she cried, staring at me, surprised doubtless that I manifested no confusion. "Do you say that you did not see her?"

"I did not."

"Nor the King?"

"The King, Madame, cannot have seen her this morning," I said, "because he is here and she is in Brussels."

"You persist in that?"

"Certainly!" I said. "Besides, madame," I continued, "I have no doubt that the King has given you his word—"

"His word is good for everyone but his wife!" she answered bitterly. "And for yours, M. le Duc, I will show you what it is worth. Mademoiselle, call—"

"Nay, madame!" I said, interrupting her with spirit, "if you are going to call your household to contradict me—"

"But I am not!" she cried in a voice of triumph that, for the moment, disconcerted me. "Mademoiselle, send to M. de Bassompierre's lodgings, and bid him come to me!"

The King whistled softly, while I, who knew Bassompierre to be devoted to him, and to be, in spite of the levity to which his endless gallantries bore witness, a man of sense and judgment, prepared myself for a serious struggle; judging that we were in the meshes of an intrigue, wherein it was impossible to say whether the Queen figured as actor or dupe. The passion she evinced as she walked to and fro with clenched hands, or turned now and again to dart a fiery glance at the Cordovan curtain that hid the door, was so natural to her character that I found myself leaning to the latter supposition. Still, in grave doubt what part Bassompierre was to play, I looked for his coming as anxiously as anyone. And probably the King shared this feeling; but he affected indifference, and continued to sit over the fire with an air of mingled scorn and peevishness.

At length Bassompierre entered, and, seeing the King, advanced with an open brow that persuaded me, at least, of his innocence. Attacked on the instant, however, by the Queen, and taken by surprise, as it were, between two fires—though the King kept silence, and merely shrugged his shoulders—his countenance fell. He was at that time one of the handsomest gallants about the Court, thirty years old, and the darling of women; but at this his APLOMB failed him, and with it my heart sank also.

"Answer, sir! answer!" the Queen cried. "And without subterfuge! Who was it, sir, whom you saw come from the forest this morning?"

"Madame?"

"In one word!"

"If your Majesty will—"

"I will permit you to answer," the Queen exclaimed.

"I saw his Majesty return," he faltered—"and M. de Sully."

"Before them! before them!"

"I may have been mistaken."

"Pooh, man!" the Queen cried with biting contempt. "You have told it to half-a-dozen. Discretion comes a little late."

"Well, if you will, madame," he said, striving to assert himself, but cutting a poor figure, "I fancied that I saw Madame de Conde—"

"Come out of the wood ten minutes before the King?"

"It may have been twenty," he muttered.

But the Queen cared no more for him. She turned, looking superb in her wrath, to the King. "Now, sir!" she said. "Am I to bear this?"

"Sweet!" the King said, governing his temper in a way that surprised me, "hear reason, and you shall have it in a word. How near was Bassompierre to the lady he saw?"

"I was not within fifty paces of her!" the favourite cried eagerly.

"But others saw her!" the Queen rejoined sharply. "Madame Paleotti, who was with the gentleman, saw her also, and knew her."

"At a distance of fifty paces?" the King said drily. "I don't attach much weight to that." And then, rising, with a slight yawn. "Madame," he continued, with the air of command which he knew so well how to assume, "for the present, I am tired! If Madame de Conde is here, it will not be difficult to get further evidence of her presence. If she is at Brussels, that fact, too, you can ascertain. Do the one or the other, as you please; but, for to-day, I beg that you will excuse me."

"And that," the Queen cried shrilly—"that is to be—"

"All, madame!" the King said sternly. "Moreover, let me have no prating outside this room. Grand-Master, I will trouble you."

And with these words, uttered in a voice and with an air that silenced even the angry woman before us, he signed to me to follow him, and went from the room; the first glance of his eye stilling the crowded ante-chamber, as if the shadow of death passed with him. I followed him to his closet; but, until he reached it, had no inkling of what was in his thoughts. Then he turned to me.

"Where is she?" he said sharply.

I stared at him a moment. "Pardon, sire?" I said. "Do you think that it was Madame de Conde?"

"Why not?"

"She is in Brussels."

"I tell you I saw her this morning!" he answered. "Go, learn all you can! Find her! Find her! If she has returned, I will—God knows what I will do!" he cried, in a voice shamefully broken. "Go; and send Varennes to me. I shall sup alone: let no one wait."

I would have remonstrated with him, but he was in no mood to bear it; and, sad at heart, I withdrew, feeling the perplexity, which the situation caused me, a less heavy burden than the pain with which I viewed the change that had of late come over my master; converting him from the gayest and most DEBONAIRE of men into this morose and solitary dreamer. Here, had I felt any temptation to moralise on the tyranny of passion, was the occasion; but, as the farther I left the closet behind me the more instant became the crisis, the present soon reasserted its power. Reflecting that Henry, in this state of uncertainty, was capable of the wildest acts, and that not less was to be feared from his imprudence than from the Queen's resentment, I cudgelled my brains to explain the RENCONTRE of the morning; but as the courier, whom I questioned, confirmed the report of my agents, and asseverated most confidently that he had left Madame in Brussels, I was flung back on the alternative of an accidental resemblance. This, however, which stood for a time as the most probable solution, scarcely accounted for the woman's peculiar conduct, and quite fell to the ground when La Trape, making cautious inquiries, ascertained that no lady hunting that day had worn a yellow feather. Again, therefore, I found myself at a loss; and the dejection of the King and the Queen's ill-temper giving rise to the wildest surmises, and threatening each hour to supply the gossips of the Court with a startling scandal, the issue of which no one could foresee, I went so far as to take into my confidence MM. Epernon and Montbazan; but with no result.

Such being my state of mind, and such the suspense I suffered during two days, it may be imagined that M. Bassompierre was not more happy. Despairing of the King's favour unless he could clear up the matter, and by the event justify his indiscretion, he became for those two days the wonder, and almost the terror, of the Court. Ignorant of what he wanted, the courtiers found only insolence in his mysterious questions, and something prodigious in an activity which carried him in one day to Paris and back, and on the following to every place in the vicinity where news

of the fleeting beauty might by any possibility be gained; so that he far outstripped my agents, who were on the same quest. But though I had no mean opinion of his abilities, I hoped little from these exertions, and was proportionately pleased when, on the third day, he came to me with a radiant face and invited me to attend the Queen that evening.

"The King will be there," he said, "and I shall surprise you. But I will not tell you more. Come! and I promise to satisfy you."

And that was all he would say; so that, finding my questions useless, and the man almost frantic with joy, I had to be content with it; and at the Queen's hour that evening presented myself in her gallery, which proved to be unusually full.

Making my way towards her in some doubt of my reception, I found my worst fears confirmed. She greeted me with a sneering face, and was preparing, I was sure, to put some slight upon me—a matter wherein she could always count on the applause of her Italian servants—when the entrance of the King took her by surprise. He advanced up the gallery with a listless air, and, after saluting her, stood by one of the fireplaces talking to Epernon and La Force. The crowd was pretty dense by this time, and the hum of talk filled the room when, on a sudden, a voice, which I recognised as Bassompierre's, was lifted above it.

"Very well!" he cried gaily, "then I appeal to her Majesty. She shall decide, mademoiselle! No, no; I am not satisfied with your claim!"

The King looked that way with a frown, but the Queen took the outburst in good part. "What is it, M. de Bassompierre?" she said. "What am I to decide?"

"To-day, in the forest, I found a ring, madame," he answered, coming forward. "I told Mademoiselle de la Force of my discovery, and she now claims the ring."

"I once had a ring like it," cried mademoiselle, blushing and laughing.

"A sapphire ring?" Bassompierre answered, holding his hand aloft.

"Yes."

"With three stones?"

"Yes,"

"Precisely, mademoiselle!" he answered, bowing. "But the stones in this ring are not sapphires, nor are there three of them."

There was a great laugh at this, and the Queen said, very wittily, that as neither of the claimants could prove a right to the ring it must revert to the judge.

"In one moment your Majesty shall at least see it," he answered. "But, first, has anyone lost a ring? Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! Lost, in the forest, within the last three days, a ring!"

Two or three, falling in with his humour, set up absurd claims to it; but none could describe the ring, and in the end he handed it to the Queen. As he did so his eyes met mine and challenged my attention. I was prepared, therefore, for the cry of surprise which broke from the Queen.

"Why, this is Caterina's!" she cried. "Where is the child?"

Someone pushed forward Mademoiselle Paleotti, sister-in-law to Madame Paleotti, the Queen's first chamberwoman. She was barely out of her teens, and, ordinarily, was a pretty girl; but the moment I saw her dead-white face, framed in a circle of fluttering fans and pitiless, sparkling eyes, I discerned tragedy in the farce; and that M. de Bassompierre was acting in a drama to which only he and one other held the key. The contrast between the girl's blanched face and the beauty and glitter in the midst of which she stood struck others, so that, before another word was said, I caught the gasp of surprise that passed through the room; nor was I the only one who drew nearer.

"Why, girl," the Queen said, "this is the ring I gave you on my birthday! When did you lose it? And why have you made a secret of it?"

Mademoiselle stood speechless; but madame her sister-in-law answered for her. "Doubtless she was afraid that your Majesty would think her careless," she answered.

"I did not ask you!" the Queen rejoined.

She spoke harshly and suspiciously, looking from the ring to the trembling girl. The silence was such that the chatter of the pages in the anteroom could be heard. Still Mademoiselle stood dumb and confounded.

"Well, what is the mystery?" the Queen said, looking round with a little wonder. "What is the matter? It IS the ring. Why do you not own it?"

"Perhaps mademoiselle is wondering where are the other things she left with it!" Bassompierre said in a silky tone. "The things she left at Parlot the verderer's, when she dropped the ring. But she may free her mind; I have them here."

"What do you mean?" the Queen said. "What things, monsieur? What has the girl been doing?"

"Only what many have done before her," Bassompierre answered, bowing to his unfortunate victim, who seemed to be paralysed by terror: "masquerading in other people's clothes. I propose, madame, that, for punishment, you order her to dress in them, that we may see what her taste is."

"I do not understand?" the Queen said.

"Your Majesty will, if Mademoiselle Paleotti will consent to humour us."

At that the girl uttered a cry, and looked round the circle as if for a way of escape; but a Court is a cruel place, in which the ugly or helpless find scant pity. A dozen voices begged the Queen to insist; and, amid laughter and loud jests, Bassompierre hastened to the door, and returned with an armful of women's gear, surmounted by a wig and a feathered hat.

"If the Queen will command mademoiselle to retire and put these on," he said, "I will undertake to show her something that will please her."

"Go!" said the Queen.

But the girl had flung herself on her knees before her, and, clinging to her skirts, burst, into a flood of tears and prayers; while her sister-in-law stepped forward as if to second her, and cried out, in great excitement, that her Majesty would not be so cruel as to—

"Hoity, toity!" said the Queen, cutting her short, very grimly. "What is all this? I tell the girl to put on a masquerade—which it seems that she has been keeping at some cottage—and you talk as if I were cutting off her head! It seems to me that she escapes very lightly! Go! go! and see, you, that you are arrayed in five minutes, or I will deal with you!"

"Perhaps Mademoiselle de la Force will go with her, and see that nothing is omitted," Bassompierre said with malice.

The laughter and applause with which this proposal was received took me by surprise; but later I learned that the two young women were rivals. "Yes, yes," the Queen said. "Go, mademoiselle, and see that she does not keep us waiting."

Knowing what I did, I had by this time a fair idea of the discovery which Bassompierre had made; but the mass of courtiers and ladies round me, who had not this advantage, knew not what to expect—nor, especially, what part M. Bassompierre had in the business—but made most diverting suggestions, the majority favouring the opinion that Mademoiselle Paleotti had repulsed him, and that this was his way of avenging himself. A few of the ladies even taxed him with this, and tried, by random reproaches, to put him at least on his defence; but, merrily refusing to be inveigled, he made to all the same answer that when Mademoiselle Paleotti returned they would see. This served only to whet a curiosity already keen, insomuch that the door was watched by as many eyes as if a miracle had been promised; and even MM. Epernon and Vendome, leaving the King's side, pressed into the crowd that they might see the better. I took the opportunity of going to him, and, meeting his eyes as I did so, read in them a look of pain and distress. As I advanced he drew back a pace, and signed to me to stand before him.

I had scarcely done so when the door opened and Mademoiselle Paleotti, pale, and supported on one side by her rival, appeared at it; but so wondrously transformed by a wig, hat, and redingote that I scarcely knew her. At first, as she stood, looking with shamed eyes at the staring crowd, the impression made was simply one of bewilderment, so complete was the disguise. But Bassompierre did not long suffer her to stand so. Advancing to her side, his hat under his arm, he offered his hand.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "will you oblige me by walking as far as the end of the gallery with me?"

She complied involuntarily, being almost unable to stand alone. But the two had not proceeded half-way down the gallery before a low murmur began to be heard, that, growing quickly louder, culminated in an astonished cry of "Madame de Conde! Madame de Conde!"

M. Bassompierre dropped her hand with a low bow, and turned to the Queen. "Madame," he said, "this, I find, is the lady whom I saw on the Terrace when Madame Paleotti was so good as to invite me to walk on the Bois-le-Roi road. For the rest, your Majesty may draw your conclusions."

It was easy to see that the Queen had already drawn them; but, for the moment, the unfortunate girl was saved from her wrath. With a low cry, Mademoiselle Paleotti did that which she would have done a little before, had she been wise, and swooned on the floor.

I turned to look at the King, and found him gone. He had withdrawn unseen in the first confusion of the surprise; nor did I dare at once to interrupt him, or intrude on the strange mixture of regret and relief, wrath and longing, that probably possessed him in the silence of his closet. It was enough for me that the Italians' plot had failed, and that the danger of a rupture between the King and Queen, which these miscreants desired, and I had felt to be so great and imminent, was, for this time, overpast.

The Paleottis were punished, being sent home in disgrace, and a penury, which, doubtless, they felt more keenly. But, alas, the King could not banish with them all who hated him and France; nor could I, with every precaution, and by the unsparing use of all the faculties that, during a score of years, had been at the service of my master, preserve him for his country and the world. Before two months had run he perished by a mean hand, leaving the world the poorer by the greatest and most illustrious sovereign that ever ruled a nation. And men who loved neither France nor him entered into his labours, whose end also I have seen.

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