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MY SWORD'S MY FORTUNE

A STORY OF OLD FRANCE

BY

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Contents.

Illustrations

[Transcriber's note:

Gaps in the source book's page numbering indicate that four illustrations were missing. Physical damage seems to indicate that the frontispiece may also have been missing. Since there was no list of illustrations in the book, it is not known what their captions were. Short transcriber's notes indicate the locations of the missing illustrations.]

CHAPTER I.

I Go to Paris.

"Let the boy go to Paris," exclaimed our guest, Roland Belloc. "I warrant he'll find a path that will lead him to fortune."

"He is young," said my father doubtfully.

"He will be killed," cried my mother, while I stood upright against the wall and looked at Roland gratefully.

It was in 1650, in the days of the Regency, and all France was in an uproar. Our most gracious monarch, Louis XIV., was then a boy of twelve, and his Queen-Mother, Anne of Austria, ruled the country. She had a host of enemies, and only one friend, Cardinal Mazarin, a wily Italian priest, who was perhaps the actual master of France.

Roland Belloc, who was the Cardinal's man, had been staying for a day or two in my father's company. He was a real soldier of fortune, strong as a bull, a fine swordsman, and afraid of no man living. He told us many startling tales of Paris.

According to him, everything in the city, from the throne to the gutter, was in a state of unrest: no man knew what an hour would bring forth. One day people feasted and sang and danced in feverish merriment: the next the barricades were up, and the denizens of the filthy

courts and alleys, eager for pillage, swarmed into the light.

"Mazarin is like a wild boar," said he, "with a pack of hounds baying round him. There is the Duke of Orleans, the king's uncle, who snaps and runs away; Condé is waiting to get a good bite; while the priest, De Retz, is the most mischievous of all."

"It is almost as bad as war," said my father.

"It is war, and nothing else. But," with a laugh, "the green scarf of Mazarin will be uppermost at the finish. What do you say, Albert? Are you willing to don the Cardinal's colours?"

"I know little of these things, monsieur, but my sympathies are for the Queen-Mother."

"Of course they are!" cried he, giving me a resounding slap on the back; "so are mine, but Anne of Austria would never hold her own without the Cardinal. Come, De Lalande, let the youngster go. You will not regret it, I promise. He may not get Vançey back, but there are other estates to be won by a strong arm. Shake yourself, boy, and come out into the daylight. You are moping here like a barn-owl."

"The simile is good, Roland, for he lives in a barn. If I thought——"

"If you thought! Why, man, there is no thinking in it; the thing is as plain as the Castle yonder from the bridge over the river. He is a strapping lad, and knows how to handle a sword I'll warrant. Eh, Albert? What will he do here? Take root and grow into a turnip as likely as not. Pah! I have no patience with you stay-at-home folks. Look at his cousin Henri!"

"Henri is two years older."

"Ay, he has the advantage there, but Albert's as well grown, and better. Henri is a young scamp, too, I admit, but he is making a name already. He is hand in glove with De Retz."

"Albert belongs to the elder branch of the family," said my mother stiffly, and the soldier was going to make answer but thought better of it.

"It is kind of you to show such interest in the lad," remarked my father presently, "and we will consider the matter."

"As you please, old friend. Follow your own judgment, but should he take it into his head to wear the green scarf, let him inquire at the Palais Royal for Roland Belloc."

That night, after our guest rode away, I lay awake a long time thinking over his words. The prospect held out by him seemed to be an answer to my dreams. For many years now the fortunes of the elder branch of the De Lalande family had sunk lower and lower. My grandfather had been stripped of vast estates because he would not change his opinions to suit the times, and my father had been, as most folks thought it, equally foolish.

Unhappily, he never by any chance espoused the winning side. His house was a "Camp of Refuge" for broken men of every party, who never sued for relief in vain. The poor and infirm, the blind, the halt, and the maimed, for twenty miles around, were his family, and he never wearied of giving, till, of all our original possessions, one poor farm and homestead alone remained.

The splendid mansion of Vançey, which my grandfather had owned, now belonged to Baron Maubranne, and was often filled with a glittering throng from Paris. Occasionally my cousin Henri made one of the party, and I could not help reflecting somewhat bitterly on the difference between us.

He was two years my senior, though I was as tall as he, and more than his equal in strength. But he was handsomely dressed and in the newest fashion, while I went about in a dingy suit that was not far from threadbare. I never envied Henri, mind you, or thought the worse of him, because his father had prospered in the world, but it was seeing him, that, in the first place, led me to build my castles in the air.

My one idea in those days was to obtain possession of Vançey, where the De Lalandes had lived and died for centuries. How it was to be done I had not the least notion, and I never spoke of it to others; but Roland's talk set me thinking.

His advice seemed good. I must go to Paris and take service with some prominent man. I would serve him faithfully; he would advance my interests, and in the course of time I might save sufficient money to purchase the family estate, whither I would remove my mother and father that they might pass the end of their days in peace. That was the dream which the soldier's words had started afresh.

My father would have let me go willingly enough, but my dear mother, who had never seen the capital, feared for my welfare.

"This Paris," said she, "is a wicked place, full of snares and pitfalls for young and old. Rest content where you are, my son, and be not eager to rush into temptation. I think not so much of bodily peril as of danger to the soul."

"Albert is a gentleman," said my father, "and the son of a gentleman: he will do nothing dishonourable."

Perhaps after all I should never have left home, but for an incident which happened a few days after Belloc's departure. One evening I had wandered across the meadows skirting the river, and, busy with my thoughts, had unconsciously strayed into the private grounds at Vançey. The voices of men in earnest conversation broke my dream, and I found myself at the back of a pleasant arbour.

"It is far too risky," said one. "Let De Retz find his tools elsewhere. If the plot fails——"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed another, "it can't fail. I tell you De Retz has spread his net so carefully that we are certain to land the big fish."

Unwilling to pry into other people's secrets, I was turning back when the speakers, hearing the noise, rushed from the arbour, with their swords half drawn. One was the owner of the chateau: the other my cousin Henri.

"What beggar's brat is this?" cried Maubranne. "Off to your kennel, you rascal, and stay there till I send my servants to whip you."

"Why, 'tis my cousin," said Henri, in surprise.

"How came you here, Albert? These are private grounds."

"Yes," I answered bitterly, "and once they belonged to your grandfather and mine."

"Faith," laughed he carelessly, "he should have taken better care of them. How long have you been here?"

"A few minutes. Do not be afraid; I learned none of your business."

"If I thought you had," growled Maubranne suspiciously, "you should never leave the place. *Peste!* it wouldn't be a bad idea to keep you as it is; you would be back under your own roof," and he ended with a brutal laugh.

"Perhaps I shall be some day; less likely things than that have happened."

At this he laughed again, and bidding me take myself off his land, turned back to the arbour.

The next morning, as I stood on the rustic bridge which spans the stream near Vançey, Henri came to join me. This was an unexpected honour, but he soon made the reason of it plain.

"Perhaps it is no business of mine," said he, "but I have come with a warning. You have made an enemy of Maubranne."

"Then we are quits," I laughed, "as I have no love for him."

"He thinks you played the spy upon him!"

"Has he sent you to find out?" I asked hotly.

"No, no; but the truth is, the situation is rather awkward. You may have heard something which Maubranne would not wish repeated."

"I heard you say that De Retz was going to land a big fish and that he wanted the baron's assistance. What was meant I do not know, except that there is some conspiracy afoot."

"I believe you, cousin," said Henri, "but Maubranne won't, and if anything goes wrong he will not spare you."

"Thanks," said I lightly; "but I can take care of myself. I have not lived at Court, but my father has taught me the use of the sword."

"Why," cried Henri laughing, "you are a regular fire-eater, but make no mistake, you will stand no chance with Maubranne. There are twenty stout fellows yonder ready to do whatever they are told, and to ask no questions. I bear you no particular love, cousin, but I wish you no ill, and will give you a piece of advice. Attach yourself to some nobleman who will look after you; Maubranne will think twice before harming a follower of Condé or Orleans."

"Or De Retz."

"Ah," said he, "to be quite frank, I don't wish you to join De Retz. Relatives are best apart. However, I have given you my advice; it is for you to act on it or not, as you think best."

That night in a long talk with my father I related the whole incident, and repeated Henri's words.

"Your cousin is right," he said thoughtfully. "Now that you have stirred up Maubranne's

suspicions this is no place for you. The best thing is to accept Belloc's offer, though 'twill be a dreary life for you, alone in Paris."

"Belloc will stand by me, and Raoul Beauchamp is somewhere in the capital. He told me months ago that I can always get news of him at La Boule d'Or in the Rue de Roi."

"He is a fine fellow," said my father, "and his friendship is worth cultivating. But you must walk warily, Albert, and keep your eyes open. Unfortunately my purse is nearly empty, but I daresay that from time to time I shall be able to send you a little money."

My mother wept bitterly when she heard of the decision, but after a while she became more reconciled, and helped to pack my few things.

On the morning of my departure we sat down in very low spirits. Pierre, our faithful old servant, had prepared a simple meal, but no one seemed inclined to eat. At last we made an end of the pretence, and went to the door. "God keep you, my son," exclaimed my mother, embracing me; "I shall pray for you always."

"Remember you are a De Lalande," said my father proudly, "and do nothing that will disgrace your name."

I kissed them both, and, walking to the gate, passed through. Outside stood Pierre, who waited to wish me farewell.

"Adieu, Pierre," I cried, trying to speak gaily. "Look after the old place till my return."

The honest fellow's tears fell on my hand as he raised it to his lips and said, "Adieu, Monsieur Albert. May the good God bring you back safe and sound. Three generations, grandsire, sire, and son, I have seen, and evil days have come upon them all."

"Cheer up, my trusty Pierre! Keep a good heart. What a De Lalande has done I can do, and by God's help I will yet restore the fortunes of our house. Good-bye!" and I turned my face resolutely towards Paris.

Once only I looked back, and that was to steal a last glance at the old home. On my left lay the pleasant meadows with the silvery stream; on my right the woods and spires of Vançey, and in the distance the white-roofed farm-house, the only remnant of his property which my father could now call his own.

"He shall have it all again," I said, half aloud, and then blushed at my folly. What could I, who was hardly more than a mere boy, do? Nothing, it seemed, and yet I did not altogether despair.

Once more I turned, and, following the high road, plodded along steadily. It was the market-day at Reves, and the little town was filled with people, peasants and farmers mostly, though here and there a gaily-dressed gallant swaggered by, while the seat outside the principal inn was occupied by half-a-dozen soldiers.

In the market-place I was stopped by more than one acquaintance, with whom I laughed and jested for a few moments. A mile or so from the town I sat down by the wayside and began to eat the food which Pierre had put in my valise.

It is not necessary to recount the various stages of my journey. Sometimes with company not of the choicest, but more often alone, I trudged along, sleeping at night in shed or outhouse, so as to hoard my scanty stock of money. My shabby clothes, and perhaps the sight of my sword, saved me from being robbed, and, indeed, thieves would have gained no rich booty. A sharp sword and a lean purse are not ill friends to travel with on occasion.

It was afternoon when I reached Paris, and inquired my way to the Palais Royal. The man, a well-to-do shopkeeper, looked curiously at my shabby cloak, but directed me civilly enough.

"Monsieur is perhaps a friend of the Cardinal?" said he, as I thanked him.

"It may be," I answered; "though it is hard to tell as yet."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Monsieur, though young, is prudent, and knows how to keep his own counsel. Monsieur is from the country?"

"Well," said I, laughing, "that question hardly needs answering."

The fellow evidently intended to speak again, but thought better of it, and contented himself with staring at me very hard. In the next street a man stopped me, and started a long rigmarole, but I pushed him aside and went on.

At the gate of the Palais Royal my courage oozed out at my finger ends, and I walked about for half an hour before mustering sufficient resolution to address one of the sentries posted at the gate.

"M. Belloc?" he said. "What do you want of him?"

"I will tell him when I see him."

"*Merci!*" he exclaimed, "if you don't keep a civil tongue in your head I will clap you in the guard-room."

Just then an officer coming up asked my business, and I repeated my wish to see M. Belloc.

"Do you know him?" he inquired.

"I am here by his own invitation."

"Well, in that case," looking me up and down as if I had been a strange animal, "you are very unfortunate. M. Belloc left town only an hour ago."

"But he will return?"

"That is quite likely."

"Can you tell me when?"

"If you can wait long enough for an answer I will ask the Cardinal," he replied with a laugh.

"It is a pity the Cardinal doesn't keep a school for manners," I exclaimed, and, turning on my heel, walked away.

Here was a pretty beginning to my venture! What should I do now? I had not once given a thought to Belloc's being away, and without him I was completely lost. After wandering about aimlessly for some time I remembered Raoul Beauchamp, and decided to seek news of him at La Boule d'Or. Without knowing it, I had strayed into the very street where the curious shopkeeper lived, and there he stood at his door.

"Monsieur has soon returned," said he.

"To beg a fresh favour. Will you direct me to the Rue de Roi?"

"The Rue de Roi?" he exclaimed in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, I want to find La Boule d'Or."

At that he raised his eyebrows and, lifting his hands, exclaimed, "Monsieur, then, has not received any encouragement from the Cardinal?"

"A fig for the Cardinal," I cried irritably. "I am in need of some supper, and a bed. You don't suppose I want to walk about the streets all night."

"But it seems so strange! First it is the Palais Royal, and then La Boule d'Or. However, it is none of my business. Monsieur knows his own mind. Jacques," and he called to a boy standing just inside the shop, "show monsieur to the Rue de Roi."

Jacques was a boy of twelve, lean, hungry-looking, and hard-featured, but as sharp as a weasel. He piloted me through the crowds, turned down alleys, shot through narrow courts, turning now to right now to left, till my head began to swim.

"Has monsieur heard the news?" he asked. "They think at the shop that I don't know, but I keep my ears open. There will be sport soon. They are going to put the Cardinal in an iron cage, and Anne of Austria in a convent. Then the people will rise and get their own. Oh, oh! it will be fine sport. No more starving for Jacques then. I shall get a pike—Antoine is making them by the score—and push my way into the king's palace. Antoine says we shall have white bread to eat; white bread, monsieur, but I don't think that can be true."

All the way he chattered thus, repeating scraps of information he had picked up, and inventing a great deal besides. Much of it I understood no more than if he had spoken in a foreign tongue, but I gathered that stirring work was expected by the denizens of the low quarters of the city.

"Faith," I thought to myself, "my poor mother would have little sleep to-night if she could see me now, wandering through these dens of vice and crime. Old Belloc's path to fortune does not seem easy to find."

Jacques suddenly brought me back to reality by exclaiming in his shrill voice, "Here we are, monsieur! This is the Rue de Roi."

The information rather staggered me, but I thanked him, and drawing out my slender purse, gave him a piece of silver. He fastened on it with wolfish eagerness and the next instant had disappeared, leaving me to find La Boule d'Or as best I could.

CHAPTER II.

La Boule d'Or.

"Faith," I muttered, "Raoul has a strange taste. One would think his golden ball would soon become dingy in this neighbourhood!"

The Rue de Roi was really a narrow lane, with two rows of crazy buildings looking as if they had been planned by a lunatic architect. The street itself was only a few feet wide, and the upper storeys of the opposite houses almost touched. But in spite of its air of general ruin, the Rue de Roi was evidently a popular resort. Crowds of people went to and fro; sturdy rogues they appeared for the most part, and each man openly carried his favourite weapon—pike, or sword, or halberd.

Some belonged to the bourgeois or shopkeeping class. These, wrapped in long black cloaks, moved softly, speaking in low tones to groups of coopers, charcoal-sellers, and men of such-like occupations.

I was more astonished at beholding bands of young nobles who swaggered by in handsome dresses, laughing familiarly with both bourgeois, and *canaille*—as the lowest class was called; and I wondered vaguely if the scene had anything to do with what the boy had told me.

But I was tired and hungry, and the sights and sounds of the city had muddled my brain so that I cared chiefly to discover Raoul's inn. At any one of the numerous hostelries my lean purse would secure me a supper and a bed, and I began to think it advisable to defer any further search till the morning.

I stood in the middle of the road hesitating, as one will do at such times, when a clear young voice cried, "Hush, do not disturb him; he is waiting to hear the tinkle of the cow-bells!" a jest due no doubt to my ill-cut country clothes.

At the ringing laugh which greeted these saucy words I turned, and saw several young gallants stretched across the narrow street, completely blocking my path. Their leader was a fair-haired lad with blue eyes, and a good-humoured face that quite charmed me. He looked younger even than myself, though I afterwards learned there was little difference in our ages.

"I thought the fashion of keeping private jesters had gone out!" I exclaimed. "You should ask your master to provide you with cap and bells, young sir! Dressed as you are one might mistake you for a gentleman."

I did not mean to deal harshly with the youngster, but the last part of my speech hurt him, and he blushed like a girl; while his companions, drawing their swords, were for cutting me down off-hand. But though not understanding Paris customs I knew something of fencing, so throwing my cloak to the ground, I stood on guard. In another minute we should have been hard at it, but for the fair-haired lad, who, rushing between us, called on his friends to stand back.

"Put up your swords!" he cried in a tone of command; "the stranger is not to blame. Your words were harsh, monsieur, but the fault was my own. I am sorry if you were annoyed."

"Oh," said I, laughing, "there is no great harm done. My jest was a trifle ill-humoured, but an empty stomach plays havoc with good manners, and I am looking for my supper."

"Then you must let me be your host, and my silly freak will gain me a friend instead of an enemy."

He was a pretty boy, and his speech won on me, but I was tired out and anxious to sleep, so I replied, "A thousand thanks, but I am seeking La Boule d'Or. Perhaps you can direct me."

I must tell you the street was so badly lighted that we could not see each other clearly, but at this he stared into my face as if trying to recall my features and said, "Why, surely you must be ——; but I have been in error once to-night, and no doubt you have reasons for this disguise. Still, is it safe to go to the inn? The old fox has his spies out."

"The old fox could come himself if he would but bring a decent supper with him!" I replied, not understanding in the least what the lad meant.

"*Ma foi!*" cried he, "I have heard of your bravery, but this is sheer recklessness. And to pretend you have forgotten the inn! I suppose you don't know me?"

"Not from Adam," I replied testily. "I have only one acquaintance in Paris, and as for the inn ——" but the youngster laughed so heartily that I could not finish the sentence.

"*Parbleu!*" he cried, handing me my cloak, "this is a richer farce than mine! 'Tis you who should wear the cap and bells! But come, I will be your guide to the hostelry you have forgotten."

"Only to the door then, unless you would wish to drive me mad," at which, laughing again and bidding his companions wait, he led the way down the street, turning near the bottom into a *cul-de-sac*.

"There is the inn which you have forgotten so strangely," he said, "but you are playing a dangerous game. There may be a spy in the house."

"There may be a dozen for all I care. But I am keeping you from your friends."

"While I am keeping you from your supper. But just one question; it cannot hurt you to answer. Will the scheme go on?"

"The scheme? What scheme?" I asked, in amazement

"You are a good actor," said he a trifle crossly. "Perhaps you will tell me if Maubranne has returned to town."

"Maubranne is at Vançey," I answered in still greater astonishment.

"Then you will have to do the work yourself, which will please us better. Maubranne would have spoiled everything at the last minute. But there, I will leave you till to-morrow—unless you will be out."

"Out?" I exclaimed. "Yes, I shall be out all day and every day."

"Till the mine is laid! Well, I must tear myself away. Don't be too risky, for without you the whole thing will tumble about our ears like a house of cards."

I felt very thankful to be relieved of my unknown friend's company, for my head was in a whirl, and I wished to be alone for an hour. Pushing open the outer door and entering a narrow, ill-lit passage, I almost fell into the arms of a short, stout, red-faced man, who leered at me most horribly.

"Are you the landlord?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered, making a profound bow.

"Then show me a room where I can eat and sleep, for I am tired out and hungry as a famished hawk."

"I grieve, monsieur; I am truly sorry," he replied, bowing in most marvellous fashion for one so stout, "but, unhappily, my poor house is full. In order to make room for my guests I myself have to sleep in the stable. But monsieur will find excellent accommodation higher up the street."

"Still, I intend staying here. The fact is, I have come on purpose to see an old friend, a gentleman in the train of the Duke of Orleans."

"Will monsieur give his name?"

"M. Raoul Beauchamp," I replied; "he comes here frequently."

At this the innkeeper became quite civil, and I heard no more of the advice to bestow my custom elsewhere.

"Well, mine host," I said slyly, "do you think it possible to find me a room now in this crowded house?"

The fellow bowed again, saying I was pleased to be merry, but that really in such stirring times one had to be careful, and that the good François, who had known everybody, was dead—killed, it was hinted, by a spy of Mazarin. But now that I had proved my right, as it were, the house was mine, and he, the speaker, the humblest of my servants.

"Then show me a room," I exclaimed, "and bring me something to eat and drink."

He lit a couple of candles, and walking farther along the passage threw open a door which led into a crowded room. The inmates stopped talking, and looked at me curiously. One, leaving his seat, came close to my side.

The fellow was a stranger to me, and, unless I am a poor judge, a cut-throat by profession. Finding that I made no sign of recognition he stood still saying clumsily, "Pardon, monsieur, I mistook you for another gentleman." Then, lowering his voice he added, "Monsieur wishes to remain unknown? It is well. I am silent as the grave."

Gazing at me far more villainously than the landlord had done, he returned to his place, which perhaps was well, as I was rapidly approaching the verge of lunacy. However, I followed the innkeeper up a crazy staircase, along various rambling corridors, and finally into a sparsely-furnished but comfortable apartment. Uttering a sigh of relief at the sight of a clean bed, I sat down on one of the two chairs which the room contained.

"Thank goodness!" I exclaimed, and waited patiently while my host went to see after the supper.

He was back in less than ten minutes, and I smiled pleasantly in anticipation of the coming feast, when he entered—empty-handed! Something had happened, I knew not what, but it had increased the man's respect tremendously.

"Forgive me," he murmured penitently, "but I have only just learned the truth, and François is dead. Still it is not too late to change, and monsieur can have his own room."

"Where is my supper?" I asked. "Can't you see I am starving? What care I about your François? Bring me some food quickly."

"Certainly, monsieur, certainly," said he, and disappeared, leaving me to wonder what the new mystery was.

"What does he mean by 'own room'? Who am I? And who, I wonder, is the unlucky François? It seems to me that we must all be out of our minds together."

Presently the innkeeper, attended by a servant, reappeared, and between them they placed on the table a white cloth, a flagon of wine, a loaf of wheaten bread, a piece of cheese, and a cold roast fowl.

Sitting back in my chair, I regarded the proceedings with an approving smile, saying, "Ah, that is more to the purpose! Now I begin to believe that I am really at La Boule d'Or!"

When the men had gone, I took off my sword, loosened my doublet, and sat down to supper, feeling at peace with all the world, and especially with Raoul, who had told me of this fair haven, and also how to cast anchor therein, which, in such a crowded harbour, was of the utmost importance.

The bread was sweet and wholesome, the fowl tender, though of a small breed, the cheese precisely to my palate; while I had the appetite of a gray wolf in winter. Thus I made short work of the provisions, and, after the empty dishes were removed, tried hard to think out an explanation of the evening's events.

The chatter of the young gallant, the odd behaviour of the man downstairs, the cringing attitude of the innkeeper, the remark concerning my own room, showed that I was mistaken for another person, and one of considerable importance; so perhaps it was well for me that the worthy François was no longer alive.

The evident likeness between the unknown and myself pointed to the fact that I was usurping the place of my cousin, and in that case I had stepped into a hornet's nest. However, I was in poor condition for reasoning clearly; the supper and fatigue had made me so sleepy that my head nodded, my eyes closed, and I had much ado to keep from falling asleep in the chair.

At last I rose, and having seen to the fastenings of the door and windows and examined the walls—Raoul had told me several strange stories of Parisian life—I undressed, placed sword and pistols ready at hand, blew out the light, repeated the simple prayer my mother had taught me, and stepped into bed.

I must have fallen into a sound sleep towards daylight, as I did not waken till a servant knocked loudly at the door; but during the first part of the night my rest was feverish and broken by the oddest dreams, in which Baron Maubranne, Raoul, and my cousin, played the principal parts.

After breakfast, at which the innkeeper was still more humble than on the preceding evening, I held counsel with myself as to what was best to be done. Raoul was probably at the Luxembourg, but, remembering my reception at the gate of the Palais Royal, I had no mind to hazard another rebuff.

"I will write him a note," I concluded. "He will come at once and give me the key to all these strange doings. Meanwhile if these people choose to treat me as a grand personage, so much the better."

Calling for paper, I wrote a note and sent it by one of the servants to the Luxembourg.

Unfortunately, I was to meet with a second disappointment. The man returned with the information that M. Beauchamp was absent on a special mission for the Duke. He had gone, it was believed, to Vançey, and might not return for a week. However, the instant he returned the letter should be given him.

This was far from pleasant news. What should I do now? My first idea was to explain matters to the innkeeper, but would he believe the story? Maubranne had already accused me of being a spy, and if any of the people at the inn entertained the same notion I felt it would be the worse for me. Besides, a week was not long, and Raoul might return even sooner. "He will either come or send at once," I thought, "and not much harm can happen in a few days."

As a matter of fact I was afraid to trust the innkeeper with my story. It would have been of little consequence in ordinary times, but just then one could hardly tell friend from foe.

Three days slipped by pleasantly enough. Each evening I wandered into the streets of the city, looking with interest at the crowds of people, the splendid buildings, the gaily-dressed roysterers, the troops of Guards in their rich uniforms, the gorgeous equipages of the ladies, and the thousand strange sights that Paris presented to a provincial.

At first I found it rather difficult to make my way back to the inn, but by careful observation I gradually acquired a knowledge of the district.

Once I summoned courage to accost a soldier of the Guards, and to inquire if M. Belloc had returned from his journey.

Looking rather contemptuously at my rusty dress, he answered, "Do you mean M. Belloc of the Cardinal's household?"

"The same," I said.

"I am sorry, monsieur, but he is still out of Paris, or at least he is supposed to be, which amounts to the same thing. But if you wish particularly to see him, why not seek audience of the Cardinal?"

"Thanks, my friend; I had not thought of that."

The soldier smiled, nodded, and went on his way, humming an air as if well-pleased with himself.

"Seek audience of the Cardinal?" The bare idea froze up my courage; I would as soon have entered a den of lions!

"No, no," I thought, "better to wait for Raoul."

During this time no message had come from him, but on the fourth evening, as I was setting out for my usual promenade, a servant announced a messenger with an urgent letter.

"Show him up," I cried briskly, anxious to learn the nature of my comrade's communication, and hoping it would foretell his speedy arrival.

The messenger's appearance rather surprised me, but I was too full of Raoul to pay much attention to his servant. Still, I noticed he was a small, weazened, mean-looking fellow, quite a dwarf, in fact, with sharp, keen eyes and a general air of cunning.

"You have a letter for me?" said I, stretching out my hand.

"Monsieur de Lalande?" he asked questioningly, with just the slightest possible tinge of suspicion, and I nodded.

"It is to be hoped that no one saw you come in here, monsieur!"

"Waste no more words, but give me the letter; it may be important."

"It is," he answered, "of the utmost importance, and my master wishes it to be read without delay."

"He has kept me waiting longer than was agreeable," I remarked, taking the note and breaking the seal.

The letter was neither signed nor addressed, and my face must have shown surprise at the contents, as, looking up suddenly, I found the messenger watching me with undisguised alarm. Springing across the room I fastened the door, and, picking up a pistol, said quietly, "Raise your voice above a whisper and I fire! Now attend to me. Do you know what is in this note?"

"No!" he answered boldly.

"That is false," I said, still speaking quietly, "and will do you no good. Tell me what is in it."

"Has not monsieur learned to read?" he asked in such a matter-of-fact manner that I burst out laughing.

"You are a brave little man, and when you see your master tell him I said so."

"What name shall I give him, monsieur?"

"Name, you rascal? Why, my own, De Lalande! Now sit there and don't stir, while I read this again."

It was a queer communication, and only the fact of my chance meeting with the youngster in the Rue de Roi gave me anything like a clue as to its meaning.

This was what I read.

"I have sent to the inn, in case my mounted messenger should fail to stop you on the road. The plan will go on, *but without us*. We move only when success is certain. Make your arrangements accordingly. Our friends will be annoyed, but they can hardly draw back. I leave you to supply a reason for your absence. A broken leg or a slight attack of fever might be serviceable. Destroy this."

Plainly the note did not come from Raoul, nor was it intended for me.

What did it mean? That there was a conspiracy on foot I grasped at once, as also that my cousin was one of the prominent actors. But what, and against whom? and why was I, or rather Henri, to draw back? Who were *our friends* who would do it without us? Was my acquaintance of the Rue de Roi among them? On which side was Raoul?

Now Raoul and my cousin had no love for each other, and therefore, I argued, though wrongly as it afterwards appeared, they could not be working together.

"Come," thought I, "this is clearing the ground. By going more deeply into the matter I may be able to do Raoul a service."

But how to proceed? That was the question which troubled me.

CHAPTER III.

I Enter the Astrologer's House.

It was plain that whatever I decided to do must be done quickly. I glanced at the messenger. He sat quite still, but his shrewd, beady eyes were fixed on me as if to read my every thought. Evidently there was no help to be expected from that quarter. And, worse still, the man had discovered his mistake. The instant I opened the door he would raise an alarm, and I should probably fare ill in the ensuing scuffle.

The rascal was aware of his advantage, and actually grinned.

"Pardon me, monsieur," he said, "but I am always amused by a comedy, and this one is so rich. It is like a battle in which both sides are beaten, and yet both claim the victory. You have the paper and cannot make use of it, while I——"

"You are in more danger than you seem to imagine."

"I think not, monsieur," he answered coolly.

It was certainly a most awkward position, and I tried in vain to hit upon some plan of action. If only the man would speak, and speak the truth, he could make everything plain. I could not bribe him, and if I could he would probably deceive me, but was there not a chance of alarming him? I endeavoured to recall what Belloc had said. Henri was hand in glove with De Retz, who was Mazarin's enemy, so that the messenger would probably not relish an interview with the Cardinal.

"Come," I said at length, "let us make a bargain. You shall tell me the meaning of this letter, and I will set you free. What do you say?"

"That you offer me nothing for something, monsieur, which is a good bargain for you. Suppose I do not fall in with such a tempting offer?"

"In that case," I replied, speaking as sternly as possible, "I shall hand you over to the Guards of Cardinal Mazarin."

At this the rascal laughed merrily, saying, "The Cardinal may be a great personage at the Palais Royal, but his credit is low in the Rue de Roi. No, no, monsieur, you must try again."

It was unpleasant to be played with in this manner, yet there was no remedy. I was still wondering what to do, when suddenly there came a sound of footsteps in the corridor, and some one knocked at the door. The dwarf grinned with delight, but, pointing a pistol at his head, I bade him be silent, and asked who was without.

"Armand d'Arçy."

I recognised the voice at once as that of the youngster who had brought me to the inn. The little man also knew my visitor, and moved uneasily in his chair till my pistol came in contact with

his neck; then he sat still.

"Pardon! I am engaged."

"But you must spare five minutes. I have come on purpose to see you," and lowering his voice he added earnestly, "the affair takes place to-night."

Laughing softly at my prisoner, I said aloud, "What of it? You know what to do."

"Then nothing is to be changed?" and there was a note of surprise in D'Arçy's voice.

"Not as far as I am concerned."

"And you will be there by ten without fail?"

"Certainly, why not?"

"Well, there was a rumour floating about last night that you intended to withdraw."

"Rumour is generally a false jade," I said coolly.

"Ten o'clock, then, at the new church in the Rue St. Honoré," and with that he retired, evidently annoyed at having been kept out of the room.

"That lessens the value of your information," said I, turning to my prisoner.

"Considerably," he replied cheerfully. "I judged monsieur wrongly. It is plain that his wits are as keen as his sword."

Ignoring the doubtful compliment, and taking up the note afresh, I observed that I should soon be able to tell who wrote it.

"It is possible," he agreed, "quite possible."

He had regained his composure, and, indeed, seemed rather pleased than otherwise at the turn events were taking. Still he did not quite know what to make of me, and now and then a shadow of anxiety flitted across his face.

As we sat staring at each other it dawned upon me that I had a new problem to solve. What was to be done with this unwelcome visitor? I had made up my mind to meet D'Arçy, and the sound of a neighbouring clock striking nine warned me there was short time left for decision.

"Suppose I let you go?" I asked, half amused at the comical situation.

"That would be agreeable to me."

"Would you promise to say nothing about this affair till the morning?"

"Readily, monsieur."

"And break your promise at the first opportunity?"

"That is probable, monsieur. You see, I have a very bad memory," and he laughed.

"Then you must be kept here. I am sorry; I have no wish to hurt you, but there is no other way."

"As you please," he replied, and submitted quietly to be bound with strips torn from the bedclothes.

I fastened the knots securely, yet so as to cause him the least suffering, and then proceeded to improvise a gag. At this point his calmness disappeared, and for a short time he looked both surprised and angry.

[Transcriber's note: illustration missing from book]

However, he soon recovered his spirits, and said admiringly, "Surely monsieur must be a gaoler by profession; he knows all the tricks of the trade."

"Ah," said I, laughing, "you did not expect this?"

He shook his head disconsolately.

"But it is necessary."

"It may be for you."

"Let us say for both, since you will be prevented from getting into mischief. But come; I will make you comfortable."

The man's eyes twinkled, and any one outside hearing him laugh would have thought we were engaged in a humorous game.

"*Ma foi!*" he exclaimed, "you are politeness itself. First I am to be bound and gagged, and then made comfortable. But there is just one thing which troubles me."

"Speak out; I may be able to set your mind at ease."

"It is just possible that some one, not knowing your good points, may cut off your head."

"Well?"

"In that case, with a gag in my mouth, I shall be unable to express my sorrow."

"Have no fear," I replied, catching his meaning. "Whatever happens to me, and the venture is certainly risky, I promise you shall be released in the morning."

"Thanks, monsieur," he said, looking considerably relieved, "you certainly play the game like a gentleman."

I was really sorry to treat the man so scurvily, but, as a single word from him would upset my plans, it was necessary to prevent him from giving warning. So, carefully inserting the gag and repeating the promise to set him at liberty as soon as possible, I put my pistols in order, took my hat, and went out, closing and fastening the door.

The sight of the innkeeper in the narrow passage reminded me that he might be wondering what had become of the messenger, so I stopped and said, "If the dwarf returns before me, tell him to come again in the morning."

"Certainly, monsieur," he replied, holding the door open while I passed into the courtyard.

As usual the Rue de Roi was crowded, and I thought some of the people looked at me strangely, but this might have been mere fancy. Once, indeed, a man placed himself purposely in my path. It was the ruffian who had spoken to me in the inn, but, not desiring his company, I placed a finger on my lips to indicate silence, and walked past rapidly.

Ten o'clock struck as, entering the Rue St. Honoré, I passed up the street, seeking for the new church. Several people were still about, but I dared not ask for information, though where the church was situated I had not the faintest idea. However, I kept straight on, and, a quarter after the hour, approached a huge pile of scaffolding and the unfinished walls of a large building.

Here I paused in doubt, which was relieved by a whispered "De Lalande?" and the next instant Armand d'Arçy joined me.

"You are late," he exclaimed irritably. "The others have started, and I had almost despaired of your coming."

Taking my arm he crossed the road, hurried down a by-street, and, by what seemed a round-about route, led me into a most uninviting part of the city.

"Our friends have made good use of their time," I remarked, hoping to learn something useful from his conversation.

"They are anxious to surround the cage while the bird is still within. These strange rumours concerning the Abbé have made them uneasy."

"But I don't in the least understand you."

"Well, they must be untrue, or you would not be here. Still, the information came to us on good authority."

"Speak out, man, and let us clear up the matter; I am completely in the dark."

"Then," said he bluntly, "it is just this. We heard De Retz intended to trick us, and that you, instead of having returned to Paris, were still at Vançey. Of course I knew better, but the Abbé is a slippery customer!"

"Why not have told him your suspicions?"

D'Arçy slapped me on the back.

"Behold the innocence of the dove!" he exclaimed. "Of course he would have denied everything and demanded our proofs. But he will do well to leave off this double game. With the Cardinal in our hands we shall be too strong for him."

"I don't understand now."

"It is simple enough. You know that De Retz drew up the scheme and induced us to join him. But he can't be trusted, and half of our fellows believe he is playing us false."

"But why should he?"

"Ah, that is the mystery. He may have made his peace with the Cardinal for all I know. However, you can't draw back now; so if he has cheated us, he has cheated you. Is the plan changed in any way?"

"I have heard of no alteration."

"We had better make sure of our ground. It would be folly to miss so good an opportunity through want of foresight, though I don't see how we can fail," and, dropping his voice to a whisper, he went through all his arrangements, only pausing now and again to ask my opinion, which he evidently valued highly.

I walked by his side like one in a dream, hardly knowing how to answer. Here was I, a simple country youth, plunged into a conspiracy so daring that the recital of it almost took away my breath. The enterprise, started by the Abbé de Retz, was no less than the forcible carrying-off of Cardinal Mazarin, the most powerful man in France. I turned hot and cold at the thought.

It was known that the Cardinal, as a citizen, paid occasional visits to a certain astrologer, in whose house he was at present, and the conspirators had arranged their plans accordingly. False passports were obtained, a body of horse were in readiness outside the gates, and it only remained to obtain possession of the Cardinal's person. This part, it appeared, De Retz had promised should be undertaken by my cousin, who was deep in his confidence, while a band of reckless young nobles, with D'Arçy at their head, should form an escort.

"Once we get the old fox trapped, the rest will be easy," said my companion. "I warrant he won't get loose again in a hurry."

"No," said I, puzzling my brain as to why De Retz had at the last moment drawn back from the venture.

There was no doubt he had written the note even then inside my doublet. Something had occurred to shake his resolution, but what was it? Had he really joined hands with the Cardinal? The letter to Henri did not look like it. Had he intended all along to sacrifice his allies? I did not think so, because his note seemed to hint at their possible success. Perhaps, and it was my final conclusion, some unexpected danger had compelled him to hold his hand.

What ought I to do? As we walked along, Armand d'Arçy rallied me on my silence, but happily the darkness hid my face, or he must have suspected something was wrong.

"Are you growing nervous, De Lalande?" he asked banteringly. "I have always heard that nothing could alarm you."

"I am not alarmed."

"The old fox will be surprised by our visit. I wonder if he has gone to the astrologer's to have his fortune told?"

"Very likely. He believes in the stars and their influence."

"Now, for me, I put more faith in a sharp sword," said D'Arçy, laughing, "but everyone to his taste. Steady, now, some of our fellows ought to be posted here."

"Suppose," I asked, suddenly coming to a halt, "that instead of trapping Mazarin, we are walking into a trap ourselves?"

"Why, in that case, my friend, you will be the only one caught. We shall remain in hiding till you give the signal."

"Of course," and I heaved a sigh of relief, "I had not thought of that."

D'Arçy's words had shown me a way out of the difficulty. I intended, if possible, to save the Cardinal, yet I could not in honour betray the men whose secret I had discovered by such a series of strange accidents.

As it was, my course seemed plain and open. I had only to see Mazarin, acquaint him with his danger, and get him into a place of safety; after that I could tell the conspirators their plans were discovered, and they would quickly disperse. Mazarin might not believe my story, but something must be left to chance.

"We are getting near now," whispered D'Arçy presently; "you don't wish to draw back?"

"Not in the least, why?"

"Because if you do, I will take your place. If the plan fails it is the Bastille for you, and perhaps a rope with a running knot from the walls."

"Pshaw! there is no danger for me, and you can take care of yourselves."

At the end of a by-street, we were challenged by a low "*Qui-vive?*" when we instantly halted.

"*Notre Dame!*" replied D'Arçy quietly. "Is that you, Peleton? Are we in time?"

"The old fox has not come out, and a light still burns in the third window. Have you brought De Lalande?"

"Here he is."

"*Ma foi!* 'tis more than I expected. But I warn our friend that if he means playing us false he will have need to look to himself."

A ready answer sprang to my lips, but I checked it. D'Arçy had evidently only a passing acquaintance with my cousin, but this man might know him well; in which case the trick would be discovered.

"Peleton is always suspecting some one," laughed D'Arçy, "and generally without cause."

"Well, if anything goes wrong, remember I warned you!" growled the other.

"Peace!" cried a third man, stepping from the shadow of a doorway. "Small wonder the Cardinal wins, when we spend our time in squabbling between ourselves. De Lalande, you are late, but now you have come, let us begin the business without more delay. Mazarin is still in the house, and our men are waiting. The horses are harnessed, and directly you give the signal the carriage will be at the door. I need not warn you to take care of yourself."

"Three knocks, remember," said D'Arçy. "We will stand here in the shadow; the others are in their places, and keeping a sharp look-out."

"One minute!" I whispered to him. "There is just a trifling matter I wish done. If I don't return —and that seems not unlikely—will you go straight back to La Boule d'Or? You will find a man in my room tied up and gagged; set him at liberty."

D'Arçy gave a low whistle of surprise, but without asking for an explanation he promised to go.

"If we succeed I can attend to him myself," I added. "Now stand back."

"Don't forget," said the third man, "that if the Cardinal slips through your fingers your own neck will be in danger."

"Good luck," cried D'Arçy softly, as I crossed the road to the astrologer's house.

For a moment, as my companions disappeared, my courage failed. I was bound on a really desperate venture, and the first false slip might land me in a dungeon of the dreaded Bastille.

Suppose that Mazarin, having learned of the plot, had filled the house with his Guards? Once I raised my hand and dropped it, but the second time I knocked at the door, which, after some delay, was opened wide enough to admit the passage of a man's body. The entry was quite dark, but I pushed in quickly, nerving myself for whatever might happen. At the same moment sounds of firing came from the street, and I heard the man Peleton exclaim, "Fly! We are betrayed!"

I turned to the door, but some one was already shooting the bolts, while a second person, pressing a pistol against my head, exclaimed roughly, "Don't move till we have a light. The floor is uneven, and you might hurt yourself by falling."

"You can put down that weapon," I said. "I am not likely to run away, especially as I have come of my own free will to see your master's visitor."

The fellow laughed, and lowered his pistol.

"You will see him soon enough," said he, and I judged by his tone that he did not think the interview would be a pleasant one.

Another man now arriving with a lantern, I was led to the end of the passage, up three steps, and so into a large room, sparsely furnished, but filled with soldiers. Truly the Abbé was well advised in withdrawing from the conspiracy.

"*Peste!*" exclaimed the officer in charge, "why, 'tis De Lalande himself, only the peacock has put on daw's feathers. Well, my friend, you have sent your goods to sea in a leaky boat this time."

He took a step towards me, and then stopped in astonishment.

"What mystery is this?" he cried. "Are you not Henri de Lalande? But, no, I see the difference now. Ah, Henri is a clever fellow after all; I thought he would not trust himself on this fool's errand. But you are marvellously like him. Well, well; whoever you are, the Cardinal is anxious to see you."

"I came on purpose to speak to him. Had I known he was so well prepared to receive visitors I

might have spared myself a troublesome journey."

"And deprived His Eminence of a great pleasure! Unbuckle your sword, and place your pistols on the table. The Cardinal is a man of peace, and likes not martial weapons."

To resist was useless; so I surrendered sword and pistols, which the officer handed to one of his men.

"Now," he said, "as you are so anxious to meet the Cardinal, I will take you to him at once. This way."

We toiled up a narrow, steep, and dimly-lighted staircase, at the top of which a soldier stood on guard, while another paced to and fro along the narrow landing. Both these men, as well as those in the lower part of the house, wore the Cardinal's livery.

There were three rooms, and, stopping outside the second, the officer knocked at the door, while the soldier on duty stood close behind me. For a time there was no answer, but presently a calm voice bade us enter, and the next instant I stood face to face with the most powerful man in France.

CHAPTER IV.

I Meet the Cardinal.

My glance travelled rapidly round the apartment, which was large, lofty, and oddly furnished. A table littered with papers and parchments occupied the centre; the walls were almost hidden by hundreds of books and curious-looking maps; two globes stood in one corner; on a wide shelf close by were several strange instruments, the uses of which I did not understand; a pair of loosely hung curtains screened the lower end of the room.

At the table sat two men of striking personal appearance.

One was a tall, venerable man with white beard and moustache, broad, high forehead, and calm, thoughtful, gray eyes. He was older than his companion, and the deeply-furrowed brow bespoke a life of much care, perhaps sorrow. He was dressed in a brown robe, held loosely round the middle by silken cords; he wore slippers on his feet, and a tasselled cap partly covered his scanty white hair. I put him down as the astrologer.

The second man attracted and repelled me at the same time. He was in the prime of life and undeniably handsome, while there was a look of sagacity, almost of craft, in his face.

"A strong man," I thought, looking into his wonderful eyes. "Not brave, perhaps, but dogged and tenacious. A man of cunning, too, who will play a knave at his own game and beat him. And yet, somehow, one would expect to find him occupied with paint-brush or guitar, rather than with the affairs of State."

Stories of the powerful Cardinal had reached even my quiet home, but I had never met him, and now stood looking at his face longer perhaps than was in keeping with good manners.

"Hum!" said he, watching me closely, "you are very young for a conspirator; you should be still with your tutor. What is your name?"

"Albert de Lalande," I replied.

"De Lalande!" he echoed in surprise. "The son of Charles de Lalande?"

"Your Eminence is thinking of my cousin Henri."

"Pouf! Are there two of you? So much the worse; one of the family is sufficient. Eh, Martin?"

"This youth is like his cousin," replied the astrologer, "but I imagine he knows little of Paris. I should say he is more at home in the fields than in the streets."

"It seems he knows enough to be mixed up in a daring plot," said Mazarin with a grim smile. "But, after all, my enemies do not rate my powers highly when they send a boy like this against me. I believed I was of more importance."

"No one sent me," I replied; "on the contrary, I came to warn you, but I need have had no fear for you, I find."

The Cardinal sighed. "The wolves do not always get into the sheep-fold," he murmured gently, at which, remembering the body of armed men below, I felt amused.

He was about to speak again, when, after tapping at the door, an officer entered the room. His clothes were torn and soiled, there was a smear of blood on the sleeve of his coat, and he glanced at his master sheepishly.

"Alone!" exclaimed the latter in astonishment, upon which the soldier approached him and began to speak in whispers. Mazarin was evidently displeased, but he listened courteously to the end.

"What bad luck!" he cried. "I thought they were all nicely trapped. However, no doubt you did your best. Now go and let a surgeon attend to your hurts. I see you have been wounded."

"A mere scratch, your Eminence," replied the officer saluting, and, when he had withdrawn, the Cardinal again turned his attention to me.

"Yes," said he, as if in answer to a question, "your companions have escaped: so much the better for them. But, deprived of the bell-wether, the flock counts for little. Now, as you value your life, tell me who sent you here. I warn you to speak the truth; there are deep dungeons in the Bastille."

"My story is a curious one, your Eminence, but it throws little light on the affair. My father is the head of the De Lalande family, but he is poor, and has lost his estates. The other day our friend, M. Belloc——"

"Belloc?" exclaimed the Cardinal quickly, "what Belloc?"

"Roland Belloc, your Eminence, a stout soldier and your faithful servant. He offered, if I came to Paris, to speak to you on my behalf."

"Go on," said Mazarin, with evident interest.

"Shortly after his return to Paris I had the misfortune to offend Baron Maubranne of Vançey, and then my mother, who had before been unwilling to part from me, agreed to my leaving home. I came to Paris, and inquired for my friend at the Palais Royal. The soldiers declared he was absent, which was unfortunate for me. However, I remembered the name of an inn at which another friend sometimes puts up, and I went there."

"One must go somewhere," said Mazarin.

"Yesterday," I continued, "a man brought me a note. It was intended for some one else, but, not knowing that, I opened it. It was very mysterious, but I gathered there was a conspiracy on foot, and that you were to be the victim."

"That is generally the case," exclaimed Mazarin with a sigh.

"As the conspirators mistook me for some one else——"

"For your cousin!"

"I resolved to play the part, in the hope of being able to put you on your guard."

"A remarkable story!" said Mazarin thoughtfully. "Eh, Martin?"

"It seems to ring true, your Eminence," replied the astrologer.

"There are two or three points, though, to be considered. For instance," turning to me, "to which party does this second friend of yours belong?"

"I really do not know that he belongs to any party."

"Well, it is of small consequence. Now, as to the people who came here with you?" and he cast a searching glance at my face.

"I should not recognise them in the street."

"But their names?" he cried impatiently. "You must know at least who their leader was."

"Pardon me," I said quietly, "but I did not undertake to play the spy. What I learned was by accident."

"You will not tell me?" and he drummed on the table.

"I cannot: it would be dishonourable."

"Oh," said he with a sneer, "honour is not much esteemed in these days!"

"My father has always taught me to look on it as the most important thing in the world."

"A clear proof that he is a stranger to Paris. However, I will not press you. It will ill-suit my purpose to imprison D'Arçy—he is too useful as a conspirator," he added with a chuckle.

I started in surprise at the mention of D'Arçy's name, and the Cardinal smiled.

"At present," he said kindly, "your sword will be of more service to me than your brains. Evidently you are not at home with our Parisian ways. Come, let me give you a lesson on the question and answer principle. How came I to be on my guard? My spies, as it happened, were ignorant of the conspiracy."

"Then one of the plotters betrayed his comrades."

"Precisely. Price—a thousand crowns. Next, how did De Retz discover that the plot was known?"

"That is more difficult to answer. I thought at first he himself was the traitor."

"A shrewd guess. Why did you alter your opinion?"

"Because De Retz cannot be in need of a thousand crowns."

"Quite true. Well, I will tell you the story; it will show you the manner of men with whom I have to deal. Two thousand crowns are better than one; so my rogue having first sold the Abbé's secret to me, obtained another by warning him that the conspiracy was discovered."

"But, in that case, why did he let his friends proceed with the scheme?"

Mazarin laughed at my question, saying, "That opens up another matter. All these people hate me, but they don't love each other. For instance, it would have delighted De Retz to learn that young D'Arçy was safe under lock and key in the Bastille."

"Then he will be disappointed."

Again the Cardinal laughed.

"That," he said, "was my rogue's masterpiece. Having pocketed his two thousand crowns, he sold us in the end by raising the alarm before my troops were ready. In that way he will stand well with his party, while making a clear gain all round. But, now, let us talk of yourself. I understand you have come to Paris to seek your fortune."

I bowed.

"That means I must either have you on my side or against me. There are several parties in Paris, but every man, ay, and woman too, is either a friend to Mazarin or his enemy. What say you? Will you wear the green scarf or not? Think it over. You are a free agent, and I shall welcome you as a friend, or respect you as a foe. True, you are very young, but you seem a sensible lad. Now make your choice."

"Providence has decided for me," I answered. "I shall be glad if I can be of any service to your Eminence."

"Good! Serve me faithfully, and you shall not be able to accuse Mazarin of being a niggardly paymaster. Belloc will return in a day or two, and we will have a talk with him. But the night flies. Martin, my trusty friend, I must depart: we will discuss those accounts at a quieter season."

"At your pleasure," replied the astrologer, and then at a signal from Mazarin, a grizzled veteran stepped out from behind the curtain.

"M. de Lalande's sword will be returned to him," said the Cardinal, "and he will await me with the Guards."

"*Ma foi!* you are a lucky youngster!" exclaimed my guide when we were out of earshot; "Mazarin has quite taken to you. I have never known any one jump into his favour so quickly."

The soldiers still stood at attention in the lower room, and the officer on being informed of the Cardinal's orders returned my pistols and helped me to buckle on my sword.

"A pleasanter task," he remarked, "than escorting you to the Bastille, where I expected you would pass the night. Have you joined the Cardinal's service?"

"More or less," I answered laughing. "I hardly know how things stand till M. Belloc returns."

"Are you acquainted with him?"

"He is one of my father's chief friends, perhaps the only one. I inquired for him the other day at the Palais Royal, but your men are not too affable to a stranger. Perhaps they would have been less surly but for my shabby mantle."

Before he had time to reply, Mazarin made his appearance, and, after issuing some orders, requested me to follow him. The street was deserted, the people were in bed, there was no sign of any troops, and I could not help thinking how completely the Cardinal had placed himself in my power. He, however, appeared to anticipate no danger, but walked steadily, leaning on my arm.

"The night air is cold," he said presently, drawing his black mantle closer round him—and after a pause, "Do you know your way? Ah, I had forgotten. Your home is near Vançey?"

"*At* Vançey, my grandsire would have answered, your Eminence, but times have changed, and we with them."

"It is hard work climbing the ladder, but harder still to stand on the top," remarked the Cardinal, and he asked me to tell him something of my family history. So, as we walked through the silent streets of the slumbering city, I described sadly how the broad acres of my forefathers had dwindled to a solitary farm.

We were in sight of the Palais Royal when I finished the melancholy narrative, and Mazarin stopped. The night was already past, and, in the light of the early dawn, we saw each other's faces distinctly. It may have been mere fancy, or the result of the severe strain on my nerves, or, more simple still, the manner in which the half light played on his face, but it seemed to me that the powerful Cardinal had become strangely agitated.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked suddenly, pressing my arm. "Listen, there it is again," and from our right came the sound of a low, clear whistle.

"It is a signal of some sort," I said.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "but fortunately it was given just too late. I must be more careful in future. Come! The sooner we are inside the gate the better," and he walked so quickly that I had much ado to keep pace with him.

Passing the sentries at the gate, we crossed the courtyard, and entered the Palais Royal through a narrow door leading to a private staircase. Turning to the left at the top, Mazarin led the way along what appeared to be an endless succession of corridors. Soldiers were stationed here and there, but, instantly recognising the cloaked figure, they saluted and we passed on.

At last Mazarin paused, and blowing softly on a silver whistle was instantly joined by a man in civilian attire.

"Find M. de Lalande food and a bed," exclaimed the Cardinal briskly. "For the present he is my guest, and will remain within call. Has M. Belloc returned?"

"No, my Lord."

"Let him attend me immediately upon his arrival. Where are the reports?"

"On your table, my Lord."

"Very good. See to M. de Lalande, and then wait in the ante-chamber. You may be wanted."

The man, who, I imagine, was a kind of under secretary, made a low bow, and motioned me to follow him, which I did gladly, being both hungry and tired. Showing me into a large room, he rang the bell and ordered supper. The excitement had not destroyed my appetite, and I did ample justice to the meal. Then, passing to an inner chamber, I undressed and went to bed, to sleep as soundly as if I had still been under my father's roof.

For three days I saw nothing more of the Cardinal. All sorts of people came and went—powerful nobles, soldiers, a few bourgeois, and a number of men whom I classed in my own mind as spies. They crowded the ante-room for hours, waiting till the minister had leisure to receive them.

On the fourth morning I was lounging in the corridor, having nothing better to do, when a soldier passed into the ante-room. His clothes were soiled and muddy; he was booted and spurred, and had apparently just returned from a long journey.

"M. Belloc!" I exclaimed, but he did not hear me, and before I could reach him he had gone into Mazarin's room, much to the disgust of those who had been waiting since early morning for an audience.

As he remained closeted with the Cardinal for more than an hour, it was evident he brought important news, and the people in the ante-room wondered what it could be.

"He is a clever fellow," remarked one. "I know him well. No one has greater influence with Mazarin."

"The Cardinal is brewing a surprise," whispered another. "Paris will have a chance to gossip in a day or two."

"It is rumoured," continued the first, "that De Retz nearly found himself in the Bastille only the other night."

"'Twould have served him right, too; he is a regular monkey for mischief. I wonder the

Cardinal has put up with his tricks so long."

Thus they chattered among themselves till at last the door opened, and the secretary came out. A dozen men pressed forward eagerly, but, making his way through them, he approached the corner where I sat.

"M. de Lalande," he said, "the Cardinal wishes to see you."

I jumped up and followed him, amidst cold looks and scarcely concealed sneers at my shabby dress. It has often astonished me that people show such contempt for an old coat.

Mazarin stood with his back to the fireplace talking to my father's old friend.

"This is the youngster," said he, as I entered. "Do you know him?"

"Ay," answered Belloc, "I know him well, and I warrant he will prove as faithful a follower as any who draws your pay. I have yet to hear of a De Lalande deserting his flag. Even Henri, scamp though he may be, is loyal to his party. When De Retz sinks, Henri de Lalande will sink with him."

"*Ma foi!*" exclaimed the Cardinal, "such a fellow would be well worth gaining over!"

"You would find him proof against bribes or threats. And I warrant this lad is of the same mettle."

"Your friend gives you a high character, M. de Lalande," said the Cardinal smiling.

"I hope he will not be disappointed in me, your Eminence."

"Remember you are responsible for him," continued Mazarin, turning to the soldier. "Let his name be placed on your books; no doubt I shall soon find him something to do. Now I must carry your despatches to Her Majesty."

"Come with me, Albert," said Belloc, "and tell me all the news. You have made a good start; Mazarin speaks highly of your intelligence. This way! I am going to my quarters; I have been in the saddle for the last few days."

Roland Belloc was decidedly a man of influence at the Palais Royal. Officers and soldiers saluted respectfully as he passed, while he in turn had a smile and a nod for every one.

He had two rooms in a corner of the Palace, one of which served as a bedroom. The other was sparsely furnished, while its principal ornaments were spurs and gauntlets, swords and pistols, which hung on the walls.

As soon as he had changed his clothing he sat down, and bade me explain how I came to be in Paris. His brow darkened when I related Maubranne's insults, and though he made no remark, I knew he was terribly angry.

"You have had quite a series of adventures," he said at length, "and, for a youngster, have come remarkably well through them. Your foot is on the ladder now, my boy, and I hope you will climb high. Mazarin is a good master to a good servant, and he rules France. Bear that in mind. If all his enemies joined together I doubt if they could beat him, but they hate each other too much to unite."

"What shall I have to do?"

"I cannot say till the Cardinal gives his orders. He may make you an officer in the Guards, or keep you near him as a sort of body-servant. But do your duty wherever you are placed. Every step forward means a brighter chance of recovering Vançey."

"That is never long out of my thoughts."

"'Tis a good goal to try for, and not an impossible one either. Have you quarters in the Palace?"

"Temporary ones, till Mazarin has decided how to employ me."

The old soldier kept me with him some time longer, but seeing he was tired I made some excuse to get away, promising to call again in the morning. His return had cheered me considerably. Hitherto I had been very lonely among the crowds of courtiers, but now I felt secure of having at least one friend in the vast building.

It was strange, too, what a difference his friendship made in my position. Gaily-dressed young nobles, who, after a glance at my shabby doublet, had passed by without a word, now stopped and entered into conversation, pressing me to come here and there, as if I were their most intimate friend.

However, I declined their invitations, thinking it best to keep in the background till I had learned more of the Cardinal's intentions.

CHAPTER V.

The Reception at the Luxembourg.

"Albert? Is it possible?"

"Even so. Are you surprised to see that the daw has become a peacock?"

A week had passed since my midnight adventure, and I was taking the air in the public gardens. Many richly-dressed cavaliers were strolling about, and among them I recognised my friend Raoul Beauchamp. He saw me almost at the same time, and, leaving his comrades, came over instantly.

"I' faith," said he merrily, "a very handsome one, too! For a country-bred youngster you have not done badly. Let us take a stroll on the Pont Neuf while you tell your story. I am dying of curiosity. Do you know you have made a splash in the world?"

"A truce to flattery, Raoul," I laughed.

"It is a fact, my dear fellow. In certain circles you are the mystery of the day. Your cousin Henri growls like a savage bear at your name; Armand d'Arçy does nothing but laugh and call himself an oaf; while only last night De Retz declared you were worth your weight in gold. And, to make matters worse, no one could say whether you were free or in the Bastille! Anyway, I am glad you have not joined Mazarin's Guards."

"Why?"

"Because you should be one of us, and we are opposed to Mazarin."

"The Cardinal is a well-hated man!"

"A wretched Italian priest! The nation will have none of him. Before long France will be quit of Mazarin."

"And what will happen then?"

"*Ma foi!* I know not," replied Raoul, "except that the Duke of Orleans will take his rightful place, as the King's uncle, at the head of affairs. Parliament, of course, will have to be suppressed, Condé bought over—as usual he will want the lion's share of the spoils—while De Retz must be kept quiet with a Cardinal's hat. He expects to be made minister in Mazarin's stead, but that is a fool's dream."

"But, suppose that, after all, Mazarin should win the game?"

"Bah! it is impossible. We are too strong for him. I will tell you a secret. In a month at the outside——"

I stopped him hurriedly, exclaiming, "Be careful, Raoul, or you may tell too much."

Looking at me in consternation, he said slowly, "You do not mean to suggest that you have gone over to Mazarin?"

"At least I have taken service with him."

"Then we shall be fighting on opposite sides! What a wretched business it is, breaking up old friendships in this way!"

"Ours need not be broken; and as to your party schemes against the Cardinal, they are bound to fail. There are too many traitors among you. Mazarin learns of your plots as soon as they are formed, and you wonder at his skill in evading them! Why, he has nothing to do but sit still and watch you destroy each other."

"A pleasant prospect!" exclaimed Raoul; "but now about yourself. You have not yet explained how you became a *Mazarin*, and it is difficult to distinguish the truth among a host of fables."

"It will be more difficult for you to believe it;" upon which I recounted my various adventures since arriving in the city.

"D'Arçy is true as steel," said he, "but too thoughtless to be trusted with a secret. As to De Retz, I warned the Duke to have nothing to do with him. He fights for his own hand, and cares not who sinks as long as he swims."

"Still," I suggested, "the first traitor must have been one of your own people."

He recognised the force of this, and eagerly questioned me with a view to learning the name of the man who had sold his party; but in this I did not gratify him, having no more than a suspicion, though a strong one, myself.

For some time after this we walked along in silence, but presently he said, "I suppose you are established in the Palais Royal?"

"No. Belloc—you remember my father's old friend—wished to give me a commission in the Guards, but the Cardinal thought I could serve him better in another direction. For the present I am living in the street which runs at right angles to the front entrance."

"Well within call," remarked Raoul, adding, "meet me at the Luxembourg this evening; the Duke holds a reception. You need not fear putting your head in the lion's mouth. There is a truce: the calm before the storm; so let us make the most of it. You will come, will you not? That is right. I must leave you now; there is Vautier beckoning, but we shall meet again this evening."

When he had gone I began to reckon up how things stood. Raoul was my bosom friend, who had held by me through good and ill. I loved him as a brother, and now it appeared we might be engaged at any time in mortal strife. The prospect was not pleasant, and I walked back to the Rue des Catonnes in anything but cheerful spirits.

I had selected this street, because, as Raoul said, it was within call: the rooms I had chosen on account of their cheapness. To my surprise and disgust, the Cardinal proved a poor paymaster, and, after buying my fine new clothes, there was little money left to spend in rent.

But I reflected there were more people who would notice my velvet suit, silver aigulets, lace collar, black hat with its imposing feather, and black leather boots, than would know I lived in two small rooms in a dirty street; and experience has taught me how high a value the world sets on outside show. So I walked with head erect, and just the smallest swagger, and the passers-by did not fail to yield the wall to such a brilliant gallant. Albert de Lalande in rich velvet was a very different person from the simple country youth in rusty black, whose poverty had provoked the sneers of the guests at Vançey.

By one of those wonderful changes, which, more than anything, marked this period, Paris had become quiet and peaceful. The Frondeurs, as Mazarin's enemies were called, had stopped their private quarrels; the friends of Orleans joked with those of Condé; the agents of Mazarin and the followers of De Retz walked together like brothers; the citizens laid aside their weapons; the night-hawks had returned to their roosts. Instead of meeting with insults, the Queen Regent was greeted with applause; people shouted themselves hoarse on seeing the little King, thus expressing their loyalty in the cheapest and emptiest manner.

But no one, except his paid servants, spoke a word in favour of Mazarin, and in his cabinet at the Palais Royal, the real ruler of France sat like a big spider spinning his web; very slowly, very patiently, but strongly and surely. The threads might become loose or even destroyed; it mattered not. With a steady perseverance that no defeat could daunt, the spinning went on. The loose ends were caught up; fresh threads replaced those carried away. It was plain that the death of the spinner alone could prevent the completion of the web.

But this was looking too far ahead for all save a very few. The majority accepted the strange truce without question, and, happy in the present sunshine, cared nothing for the dark clouds that might arise in the future.

The streets were thronged with pleasure-seekers, and at night I could scarcely reach the Luxembourg for the crowd. It was a pleasant crowd, however, totally unlike the surly threatening mob I had twice seen and did not wish to see again. No one quarrelled; nothing constituted a cause for anger; the nearest approach to ill-humour being a reproachful, "Oh, monsieur, you trod on my foot!" from a pretty girl to a stout citizen, who offered a thousand apologies for his clumsiness, and was charmingly pardoned.

At the Luxembourg itself the crowds and the good-humour were repeated. The courtyard was filled with gorgeous equipages, brilliantly dressed lackeys, guards, musketeers, gigantic Swiss soldiers, in all descriptions of uniform. I smiled at the vague nature of Raoul's invitation. Certainly I had come to the Luxembourg, but to find my friend was another matter. A few days previously I should have gone away in despair, but Paris had begun my education, and, instead of turning back, I walked towards the grand staircase.

A yellow carriage had drawn up at the entrance, and two ladies descended from it. I moved aside to let them pass, when one, a beautiful woman, with laughing eyes, exclaimed, "M. de Lalande!"

I had sufficient presence of mind to make a profound bow, when the fair stranger cried with a merry laugh, "Give me your arm. What new trick is this? What are you doing here?"

"I am looking for M. Beauchamp."

"He is a nice boy, but I did not know that you and he were fond of each other."

"We are very old friends, madame."

We had reached the first landing, and were waiting for the people in front to pass on, when I answered, and the lady, looking very hard at me, exclaimed, "Why, what is the meaning of this? Surely you are, and yet are not, M. de Lalande?"

"I expect, madame, that you have mistaken me for my cousin Henri. My name is Albert."

"Why, then, you belong to Mazarin's party! I have heard of you. Do you know that you have done us much mischief? But there, a truce to quarrelling," and, keeping me at her side, she entered a magnificent salon ablaze with light and colour.

I was gazing with delight at the scene when my companion exclaimed with a smile, "Mazarin has not destroyed us all yet, it seems. But there is M. Beauchamp! Raoul, come here, you naughty boy! Here is a friend of yours from the opposite camp. I leave him in your charge. I must go to the Duke, who has just discovered me, and fancies I am hatching fresh plots. What a suspicious world it is!" and with this the beautiful woman swept across the room, every one making way for her.

"That is Madame la Duchesse de Chevreuse," explained Raoul. "I suppose she took you at first for Henri. She is one of our chief supporters, though really she has done the cause more harm than Mazarin will ever do. But come, there is an old friend yonder who wishes to see you."

He led me across the salon to where sat a fair girl with large, dreamy, tender blue eyes, an oval face framed in a mass of golden hair, delicate features, and a complexion like the bloom on a peach. This was Marie de Brione, who, when a little girl, had lived near Vançey, and had often played with Raoul and myself.

"I am going to scold you, Albert," she said smiling. "How is it you are against us? I thought we three old friends were sure to stand together. I could scarcely credit Raoul when he told me you had joined the Cardinal."

"It is very unfortunate," I stammered, "but I imagined I was acting for the best by helping Mazarin."

"You are a silly boy! When we have overthrown Mazarin we shall have to put you in the Bastille!"

"And in the lowest dungeon," added Raoul.

"You will find me more generous," I laughed. "The Cardinal is sure to win, and then I shall request him to forgive you two. Perhaps he will pardon you if I beg very hard."

"You heap coals of fire on our heads! After all, it may be a good thing to number one friend among our enemies."

"I am sure it will."

"Here is Marie's aunt," said Raoul. "I do not know what she will say at finding us on friendly terms with a *Mazarin*."

Madame Coutance was a widow, though hardly older than her niece. She was tall and graceful, with coils of dark hair covering her shapely head. Her eyes were large, black, bright and flashing; she had a straight nose, small mouth, with white even teeth, and tiny hands. I had not met her before, but since the death of Marie's parents she had taken the girl under her charge.

She entered heartily into Raoul's joke, pretending to regard me as a terrible enemy, and declaring the Duke ought not to permit me to leave the salon except as a prisoner. Jest and laughter made the time fly swiftly, and I was sorry when at last Raoul and I attended the ladies to their carriage.

"Do not forget the Rue Crillon, Monsieur de Lalande," exclaimed Marie's aunt as we stood a moment at the foot of the staircase, "unless you fear to trust yourself in our company. I must win you over to our side; your talents will be thrown away on Mazarin. But the horses are impatient, and we block the way; so adieu, messieurs," and she waved a small, delicately-gloved hand in farewell.

It was one o'clock, but the Luxembourg blazed with lights; the number of guests had scarcely diminished, though numerous carriages were drawn up in readiness to start, and groups of people still lingered outside to watch the termination of the brilliant fête.

"What do you think of Madame Coutance?" asked my comrade, as her carriage rolled away.

"She is very beautiful, and, if possible, more reckless even than Madame de Chevreuse. I hope she will not cause Marie to suffer through her folly."

Raoul's face clouded, but he affected to laugh at the idea of danger.

"The Duke will protect them," he remarked grandly, but on this point I had my doubts. However, since no good ever comes through disputing over a matter of opinion, I allowed the subject to drop, and prepared to take my leave.

"Are you going?" he asked. "I would have liked to introduce you to D'Arçy. He has been on duty all night, but will be free shortly."

"I should have been delighted, but I have to visit the Cardinal at seven this morning."

"And after?"

"If he doesn't need me, I shall go to bed. I am fatigued by these late hours."

"That is right," said he laughing. "I shall make the most of the truce, by calling for you this evening. Rue des Catonnes?"

"Third house from the corner, but I will watch for you."

Raoul, being in attendance on the Duke of Orleans, returned to the palace, while I left the courtyard in a rather thoughtful mood. I did not altogether like what I had heard of Madame Coutance. It seemed that she had joined, heart and soul, in the plots against Mazarin, and was regarded by his enemies with much favour.

As a conspirator, however, she had several failings. She boasted not alone of the victories won, but also of the victories she was about to win, and was so confident of her powers that she could never be brought to understand the strength of her opponents. I regarded her as rather a dangerous guardian for a young girl, and hoped she would not drag Marie into mischief. Away from the Luxembourg the streets were deserted, save for a few night-birds who were slinking off to their own quarters. The Rue des Catonnes was in darkness, but I knew the way, and, mounting the stairs quickly, reached my room.

"The Cardinal must not be kept waiting," I muttered, "but there is time for a short nap," and I got into bed.

A few minutes before seven o'clock I crossed the courtyard of the Palais Royal, ascended the grand staircase, stopped a moment as usual to joke with the Guards; and, traversing the corridor, reached Mazarin's room just as his secretary came out.

"Go straight in, M. de Lalande. His Eminence expects you at seven, and the clock has given warning."

The last stroke had not sounded as I entered the room.

The Cardinal had been at work for hours. He sat at a table covered with documents, and, still perusing one of them, exclaimed in his silky, purring voice, "You are punctual, M. de Lalande!"

"Yes, my lord."

"I feared," said he slowly, and rustling the paper, "that last night's festivities might have fatigued you."

He turned and looked at me so as to enjoy my surprise, but, managing with an effort to preserve my composure, I remarked that I left the Luxembourg early.

"Very sensible," he murmured. "And may I ask how you found your charming friend, Madame de Chevreuse?"

"Madame de Chevreuse is no friend of mine," I stammered awkwardly. "I met her for the first time last night, when she mistook me for my cousin."

"That likeness must be very embarrassing. It would be unfortunate if the public executioner should make a similar mistake! But let us not dwell on these things; tell me about the latest plot of Madame Coutance."

I ignored the first part of this speech, though it sounded odd, and laughed at the last, but Mazarin checked me.

"You do not take Madame Coutance seriously?" said he. "You are wrong, she is a very troublesome woman. She is like a child playing with tinder, and may make a blaze at any moment without knowing it. The safety of the State demands that such persons should be deprived of the power to work mischief."

"She did not tell me her plans," I said. "She was aware that I had the honour of serving you."

"Well, these matters are of trifling interest," he replied briskly, "since one has enemies no longer. Really your post is a sinecure. I have no more important business for you than to carry

this letter to our old acquaintance, Martin, the astrologer, and to bring back an answer. Perhaps it will be as well to travel on foot; you will attract less attention."

Handing me a sealed note, which I placed in my pocket, he signified that the interview was at an end, and I left the room.

It was fortunate that the Cardinal had given me a simple task, for my brain was in a whirl. The man was a marvel, he seemed aware of everything one did and said, and perhaps everything one thought. His spies were all over the city, and, whether from fear or greed, they served him well.

I thought of Madame Coutance, and the peril in which she stood. Thus far he had spared her, but at any moment a secret order might go forth, and the lady would be spirited away beyond the reach of friends. It was possible, too, that Marie would share her aunt's fate, though I did not believe the girl had much to do with the plots against Mazarin.

Who could have informed him of my visit to the Luxembourg? He had evidently heard all about it, and perhaps suspected me of playing him false. If so, he was at fault. Rightly or wrongly, I believed him to be the only man who could govern France till the king came of age, and, though feeling little love for him, I resolved to do everything in my power to defeat his enemies.

A strong, hearty voice put dreams to flight, and, looking up, I saw Roland Belloc, who was laughing pleasantly.

"Dreaming, my boy, and at this time in the morning?" said he. "Have you breakfasted? If not, come with me."

"Many thanks," I replied, "but I have no time. I am on the Cardinal's business, and——"

"Enough," said my old friend; "when the Cardinal has business on hand, breakfast must wait. Many a time it has been afternoon before I have found leisure for bite or sup. By the way, you are growing in favour, my boy, let me tell you. If you were only a few years older you would obtain a high post. Only your youth is against you, and every day makes that obstacle less."

"It does!" I replied, laughing. "I hope you will enjoy your breakfast; I am going to seek an appetite for mine."

"Don't miss the breakfast when you have found the appetite," said he merrily; "I have known that happen before now," and the jovial, though rugged, old soldier marched off to his quarters.

Making sure that the note was safe, I descended the staircase, crossed the courtyard, passed the sentries, who by this time were beginning to recognise me, and started on my journey.

Paris was waking up when I left the Palais Royal, but only a few people were stirring in the streets, and I pursued my way without hindrance, musing over the Cardinal's pleasantries and Roland Belloc's information.

"Faith," I muttered to myself, "Mazarin has a strange method of showing his favour."

CHAPTER VI.

Was I Mistaken?

At the corner of the narrow street opposite the astrologer's house I stopped suddenly, and hid in the shelter of a doorway. Two men, wearing cloaks so arranged that their faces could not be seen, stood before the door, waiting for admission. One, a short man, was a stranger to me, but at the other I looked my hardest.

It is not an easy matter to distinguish a person whose features are hidden, but if height, build, and general carriage counted for anything, then the tall man was no other than my cousin Henri. Presently, after a whispered conversation with some one inside, they entered the house, and the door was shut.

Now, although Mazarin kept his own counsel, I had learned that the house of the good Martin was a kind of spider's web, and that the silly flies entangled in its meshes were for the most part members of the Fronde. The house was visited by persons of both sexes and of all ranks, from the members of the Royal family downwards. They went there for all sorts of purposes. Some required rare medicines, others charms to ward off or drive away disease; one desired to learn the date of his death, another the success or failure of his plans, which the astrologer was supposed to tell by the stars or by means of crystal globes.

And the learned Martin, while plying his strange trade, discovered all their secrets, their hopes and fears, their ambitions, their loves and hates; and in due time the information reached that famous room in the Palais Royal, where the wily Italian sat, spinning the fate of men and nations alike.

It was no rare event therefore for strangers to be observed at the astrologer's house, and in an ordinary way I should have taken no further notice of the incident. But if one of the visitors was really my cousin, there must be something strange happening. He had no faith in the stars, and would certainly not bother his head about the future as depicted in glass balls.

Besides—and this made the mystery deeper—he must know that Martin was the Cardinal's friend, or rather dependant; and it seemed strange that so clever a man as my cousin should trust himself in an enemy's power. My head began to swim again as I tried to reason the matter out. Was it Henri after all? It was possible I had been mistaken, and in any case the note must be delivered, so, crossing the road, I knocked boldly at the door.

After some delay the window above my head was opened, and a man glancing out asked my business.

"To see your master, and that sharply," I replied.

Saying he would admit me immediately, the fellow disappeared, and presently I heard him stumbling along the passage. He spent a long time undoing the bolts and bars, but at last the door was opened wide.

"Enter, monsieur," said the fellow, "you will be welcome, though my master is not dressed to receive visitors. He has passed the night in reading the heavens, and is fatigued."

"That is strange! I thought he already had callers this morning."

Gazing at me in profound astonishment, the man exclaimed, "Visitors here, monsieur? Impossible! You are the first to call."

"I must have been mistaken, then," said I, with assumed calmness, but really more perplexed than ever. Unless my eyes had deceived me, the man was not speaking truly—but why? Surely his master was at liberty to receive anyone who chose to visit him!

Then another idea struck me. If Henri was one of the two men who had entered the house, were we likely to meet? and if so, what would happen? I had done his cause much harm, and had besides made him a laughing-stock for the wits of Paris. Martin was no fighting man, and the odds against me would be at least two to one. It seemed as if I had stumbled again by accident into a hornet's nest.

While I brooded over these things the man fumbled with the door, taking so long to replace the bars that I called on him sharply to make more haste.

"I am ready, monsieur; this way," and he led me along the well-known passage, up the crazy staircase, and so to the corridor, where on my recent visit a soldier had kept guard.

Opening the door of the room in which I had first met Mazarin, the man requested me to step inside and wait a moment or two whilst his master dressed. The apartment appeared empty, but I kept my hand on my sword, and was careful to peer behind the curtain. Rather, perhaps, to my surprise no one was there; so I returned to the middle of the room and stood by the table. In truth I felt very uneasy, and wished myself safely in the street.

Five anxious minutes passed before the astrologer entered. He was attired in dressing-gown, skull-cap, and slippers, and by his face one would judge that he really had been keeping vigil all night.

"I regret to have kept you waiting," he said, with an air of apology, "but your visit is somewhat early."

"Yet it seems I am not the first to need your services this morning."

"How?" exclaimed he. "You are mistaken. No one but yourself has been here since yesterday."

"Well, I was certainly under the impression that two men entered this house, as I approached it. But it is no concern of mine, except that their presence might interfere with my errand. Be kind enough to read this note, and to give me a written reply for the Cardinal."

Breaking the seal, he read the missive, and sitting down, rapidly covered a sheet of paper with small, cramped, but legible writing, while I stood on guard and alert, half expecting a sudden attack from some unknown enemies.

However, nothing unusual happened. The astrologer finished his letter, sealed it, and handed it to me, saying earnestly, "Take care of this, as it is of more consequence than you may imagine. Further, it is necessary that His Eminence should receive it without delay."

"*Peste!*" answered I laughing; "as my breakfast still waits for me in the Rue des Catonnes I am not likely to waste much time on the road," and, bidding him adieu, I followed the servant, who had remained in the corridor, downstairs.

"Monsieur has discovered his error?" said the fellow, questioningly, as he conducted me along the narrow passage.

"Yes, the men must have gone into the next house. However, it does not matter one way or another. I only feared to be kept waiting."

It was pleasant to be in the open air again, and I drew a deep breath. The janitor barred the door, and I crossed the road in a state of bewilderment. That two men had entered the house I felt positive, and the more so from the odd behaviour of Martin and his servant. Who were they? What did they want? Why had Martin lied about the matter? These questions, and others like them, kept my brain busily employed, but to no purpose. I could supply no satisfactory answers, and every passing moment left me more perplexed.

It struck me once that Martin was playing the Cardinal false, but this seemed absurd, and yet ——

"No, no," I muttered, "he would not dare. Still, there is something going on with which Mazarin should be made acquainted."

I did not relish the idea of playing the spy, but I was breaking no confidence, and, after all, it was necessary to protect one's own friends. My plan was soon formed. I walked along the narrow street, waited five minutes at the farther end, and returned cautiously to a dingy cabaret, from which a good view of the house could be obtained.

"Now," thought I, "unless my wits are wool-gathering, I am about to behold a miracle. I am going to see two men leave a place which they did not enter. Surely this Martin is something more than an astrologer?"

For nearly an hour I remained with my eyes fixed on the door, which, however, remained closed, and I began to feel a trifle discouraged. What if I had discovered a mare's nest? The important letter was still in my pocket, and Mazarin would be none too pleased at the delay. Perhaps it would be best to abandon the enterprise and to return at once.

I had almost resolved on this plan when two men strolled past the inn. Filled with amazement, I rose quickly, and went into the street. The door of the astrologer's house was shut; in truth it had not been opened, yet here were my mysterious strangers several yards in front of me! Rubbing my eyes, I wondered if I had made a second blunder! But that was impossible, and the idea not worth considering. While I stood thus, dazed and half-stupefied by the strangeness of the affair, the men had walked half-way along the street.

Paris was now fully awake, the shops were open, people were hurrying to their daily tasks, and the number of persons abroad made it difficult to keep sight of my quarry. Several times the men stopped, and glanced behind, as if afraid of being followed, but they did not notice me, and, after a long roundabout journey, we all reached the Rue St. Dominique.

Here the strangers, evidently concluding that caution was no longer necessary, pushed back their hats and drew their cloaks from their faces. It was as I had suspected from the first—the tall man was my cousin Henri, but his companion was unknown to me. Taking a good look, in order to describe him to Mazarin, I found him to be a short, dark man, with an ugly face, but beautiful white teeth. His eyes were beady and restless, he was bandy-legged, and walked with a peculiarly awkward gait.

Half-way along the street the two stopped outside a handsome building, conversed earnestly together for several minutes, and then, ascending the steps, disappeared.

"Pouf!" I exclaimed. "What can that little bandy-legged fellow be doing at the Hotel de Chevreuse? I wager he and my cousin are brewing some fresh mischief."

As no good could possibly come from further waiting, I turned away, and hurried back to the Palais Royal, eager to inform Mazarin of my discovery, and to get my breakfast. Roland Belloc met me in the courtyard, and held up a warning finger.

"You are in disgrace, my friend," said he, gravely; "the Cardinal has been waiting for you a long time. He has sent out repeatedly in the last hour to ask if you had returned."

"He will forgive the delay—I have discovered something of importance."

Dressed in his ceremonial robes, the Cardinal sat at the table, with an ominous frown on his face.

"The letter!" he cried impatiently, directly on my entrance. "Where is Martin's list? By my faith, M. de Lalande, you do well to keep Her Majesty waiting a whole hour!" and he took the paper from my hand somewhat ungraciously.

The letter apparently contained good news, and the Cardinal, smiling almost joyously, rose to leave the room.

"One moment, my Lord," I observed, "I have something to tell you which may be important."

"It must stay till after the audience; I cannot keep the Queen waiting longer. I shall return in an hour or two. Meanwhile Bernouin will see that you obtain some breakfast," and he summoned his secretary.

"M. de Lalande has not breakfasted," said he. "I leave him in your charge. Meanwhile I can see no one. Do you understand?"

Bernouin, a man of few words, responded by a low bow.

After partaking of a hearty breakfast, I lay down upon a couch, and, being thoroughly tired, fell fast asleep, not waking again till towards the middle of the afternoon, when Bernouin came to say the Cardinal awaited me.

Jumping up, I followed the secretary, not wishing to receive a further reproof from the minister. Pausing at the door, Bernouin gave a discreet tap, which was answered by Mazarin.

"M. de Lalande," announced the secretary, and at a sign from the Cardinal withdrew.

Mazarin was writing, but, laying down his pen, he motioned me to a seat opposite him.

"You have breakfasted, have you not?" he asked.

"Yes, my Lord, thank you," I replied.

He smiled affably, and was plainly in good humour—the result perhaps of his morning's work. Suddenly this mood changed, the frown came back to his face, and he exclaimed sternly, "I had almost forgotten. Why were you so long on your errand this morning?"

"That is what I wished to speak of, your Eminence, but I am confident you will agree that I acted rightly."

"I dislike putting the cart before the horse," said he; "the verdict should follow the evidence. It will be better for you to relate the story first."

Picking up his pen again, he sat twisting it between his fingers, but looking me straight in the face, and listening intently to every word. He did not once attempt to interrupt, but preserved his patience until the end.

"Chut! my dear Martin," said he, when I had finished, just as if the astrologer were present; "we were mistaken. This young provincial has eyes in his head after all. M. de Lalande, not a word, not a syllable of this to any one. Should you babble, the Bastille is not so full but that it can accommodate another tenant. Now, let us go through the story again. As you rightly observe, it is most interesting, quite like a romance. These men were in the house; of that you are sure?"

I bowed.

"Very good. And our friend Martin denied having seen them?"

"He declared I was his first visitor this morning."

"You did not press the point?"

"Not at all, my Lord. I considered it better to admit my mistake, and to allow the subject to drop."

"In that you did well. You are really learning fast, and I shall find you of service yet. Now let us proceed. You saw the two men again, but they did not come out of Martin's house. Are you certain about that?"

"I did not once remove my eyes from the door, and it was closed the whole time."

"Then you cannot account for the reappearance of these visitors?"

I shook my head.

"If my explanation is correct, it throws a light on several queer things," said Mazarin smiling. "However, that part of the business can stand over, I am not in a hurry at present. Now as to these cloaked gentlemen! Did you recognise them?"

"Only my cousin Henri."

"Ah, he is a clever fellow, a trifle too clever perhaps. Now describe his companion to me again."

"A little man, your Eminence, dark and ugly. An ill-made, awkward, bow-legged fellow, looking the more ungainly because of his handsome apparel."

"The description is not a flattering one!" laughed the Cardinal. "This ugly little man of yours is no less a person than Jean Paul de Gondi, Abbé de Retz, Coadjutor of Paris, Archbishop of Corinth, a future Cardinal—so it is rumoured—and the man who is to fill Mazarin's office when that unworthy minister has lost his head."

Dipping his pen in the ink, he wrote an order and handed it to me.

"For M. Belloc," he said. "In a few hours we shall discover what your information is worth, but, whatever the result, you have done your part well."

Rising from the chair, I bowed and left the room, rather puffed up by the Cardinal's praise; but disappointed at not having learned the nature of the secret which I had unearthed.

Was it possible that Martin had been playing a double game? It appeared very much like it, and, according to all accounts, De Retz paid his servants in good money, while those who served the Cardinal were generally rewarded by empty promises.

Finding Belloc, I handed him the paper, at which he glanced quickly, and exclaimed, "More work, my boy, and to be done at once. The Cardinal's orders are all marked 'Immediate,'" and he went off with a good-humoured laugh.

As there was nothing more to detain me at the Palace I returned to my rooms in the Rue des Catonnes, and, having made myself ready, sat down by the casement to watch for Raoul. The street was very still and peaceful that evening, and, while waiting for my friend, my thoughts roamed over the incidents of the day. As to my own discovery, it did not engage my attention long. I had done my duty in warning Mazarin, and for the rest he must look to himself.

One point, however, caused me a considerable amount of anxiety. The Cardinal had spoken of Madame Coutance, and in no pleasant way. I knew very little of the lady, but, as I have said, it vexed me that her niece's safety should be to some extent in the hands of such a hare-brained conspirator.

"She will be doing an extra foolish thing some day," I said to myself, half asleep and half awake, "and the Cardinal will clap both her and Marie into the Bastille. I must warn Raoul; he may have some influence over her."

"Over whom?" exclaimed a merry voice, and, opening my eyes, I beheld Raoul himself standing close to me.

"A good thing for you that the truce still holds," cried he gaily, "or I could easily have deprived Mazarin of a supporter."

He laughed again quite merrily, and I laughed too; the idea of Raoul raising a hand against me seemed so ridiculous.

"Sit down a minute," I said, "while I explain. The affair is not a secret," and I repeated Mazarin't remarks to him.

"You are right, Albert," he exclaimed gravely; "this is a serious matter, but unfortunately I can do nothing. Madame Coutance grows more reckless every day, and at present is using all her influence to assist De Retz. To-morrow perhaps she will join Condé's party, for any side opposed to Mazarin is good enough for her."

"Does Marie side with her aunt?"

"She cannot help herself, though she has no liking for intrigue. But come, let us take a turn in the city; it will blow the cobwebs out of our brains."

We had reached the Pont Neuf when a gaily dressed gallant, calling to Raoul, caused us to stop.

"Armand!" exclaimed my comrade in surprise. "I understood you had gone to the Louvre!"

"Are you not ashamed to be caught plotting with a *Mazarin*?"

"Ah! I forgot that you knew M. de Lalande!"

"Oh, yes," said I, "this gentleman and I are warm friends. He shows me to my inn, comes to my rooms, and invites me to go with him on his parties of pleasure."

Laughing lightheartedly, young D'Arçy took my arm.

"You rascal!" he cried, "it is fortunate we are at peace, or I should have to run you through for the honour of the Fronde. You made us the laughing-stock of Paris."

I inquired if he had released the prisoner at the inn, on which he gave us such a comical account of the dwarf's unhappy plight that we could not keep from laughing aloud.

"Who was he?" asked Raoul.

"Pillot the dwarf, the trusty henchman of De Retz."

"That is awkward for you," said Raoul turning to me. "Pillot is a cunning rogue, and is now hand in glove with your cousin. Really, Albert, you must take care of yourself, you have raised up a host of enemies already."

"And the Italian cannot save you!" remarked D'Arçy, with a superior air; "his own downfall is at hand. Alas, my poor friend, I pity you."

We were still laughing at him when he suddenly exclaimed, "Ah, here is Lautrec. Tell me, is he not a show picture? I feel almost tempted to change sides, if only to deck myself out so gorgeously."

CHAPTER VII.

The Cardinal takes an Evening Walk.

D'Arçy's acquaintance was one of the *petits maîtres*, as Condé's followers were called, and it was easy to see that he prided himself immensely on his fine clothes. He was dressed in a coat of dark blue cloth covered with fine lace; his mantle was scarlet, and his silk stockings, ornamented with lace, were of the same colour. He wore a black hat turned up *à la catalane*, and adorned by an enormous black feather, and his gloves were of a soft, gray buckskin. His scabbard was picked out with various designs, and jewels shone in the hilt of the sword.

"Lautrec, my friend, come here!" cried D'Arçy. "*Ma foi!* what an interesting group! Raoul and I for the Duke; Lautrec for Condé, and M. de Lalande for Mazarin. We only want a friend of De Retz to complete the party!"

"What?" cried Lautrec, looking at me with a broad smile, "the hero of Scarron's poem? The youngster from the country who tricked De Retz? M. de Lalande, I am delighted to meet you!"

"We will go to Perret's, and Lautrec shall sing us the famous song which Scarron wrote on our attempt to abduct the Cardinal," cried D'Arçy.

"But," said I in surprise, "it is not possible that the affair is openly talked about?"

"Why not? It is of the past. Who cares for yesterday's thunderstorm, especially when it did no damage? We are all brothers now."

"But is it safe to introduce a *Mazarin* at Perret's?" asked Raoul.

"Have no fear," exclaimed Lautrec, "your young friend will be welcome; only we shall not tell him our secrets!" and he glanced roguishly at D'Arçy.

It seemed rather odd to be on terms of friendship with Mazarin's enemies, but this was only one of the strange features of this strange period. No one appeared able to remain serious long; a fight was followed by a banquet, and your opponent of the morning supped with you at night.

Lautrec was correct in saying that no one would molest me at Perret's, which was a large meeting-room, where we found a score of men, all young or at least not more than on the threshold of middle age, and all richly dressed, though none so extravagantly as the *petit maître*.

"Messieurs," cried my new acquaintance, "we have brought you an illustrious visitor. Behold the youth whom Scarron has immortalised! A *Mazarin*, but a prince of good fellows!" and he clapped me on the back.

Had I been one of them they could not have received me in a more friendly manner, and in a very short time I was completely at my ease.

"Let us have the song, Lautrec," said D'Arçy, "our friend has not heard it."

"Yes, yes, the song!" cried the others, laughing, and Lautrec stood up to sing the famous song composed by the Abbé Scarron.

The author had been made acquainted with the principal facts, but my wonder at this soon gave place to amusement. Mazarin, De Retz, Henri, myself, and even poor Pillot, were covered with ridicule, and at each verse the merriment of the audience increased.

It appeared that my cousin, in order to explain his absence from the expedition, had given out that his leg was injured by a fall, and when Lautrec reached that part the whole company screamed with delight.

"Again Lautrec! Let us have the verse again! Oh the poor cousin Henri! What a terrible misfortune!" they cried.

As for me, I lay back in my chair, with the tears running down my cheeks, and Lautrec, beginning the verse again, the others took it up, roaring at the tops of their voices, a lament for my cousin's injury.

In the very midst of the confusion Henri himself opened the door, and stood in amazement, staring at the mad scene. Lautrec spied him immediately, and crying, "Ah, here is our dear cousin!" hobbled over to him on one leg, nursing the other and singing with all his might. D'Arçy, Raoul and the rest followed, and forming a ring danced round him like a pack of madmen. I could not help laughing at their antics, and, to my surprise, Henri, instead of being angry, joined heartily in the fun.

"Ah," he cried presently, spying me, "there is the rogue who caused all the mischief. I' faith, Albert, I did myself an ill turn in advising you to come to Paris. Well, it is done with now, but I warn you not to cross our path a second time."

He spoke in a jesting tone, and laughed loudly, but the look in his eyes told more than his words, and I guessed that for all his play my cousin would show me but scant mercy. Still, he was pleasant enough, and I passed a very agreeable hour in his company.

Presently Raoul, who was on night duty at the Luxembourg, was obliged to leave, and I, bidding my new acquaintances adieu, accompanied him.

"It is a pity you are not coming in," said he, half in jest, half in earnest, as we stopped at the gates; "we could have such pleasant times together."

"With young D'Arçy for a third!" I laughed. "No, no, Raoul; it looks tempting, but it wouldn't answer. I am not much in love with Mazarin, but France is safer with him than with your friends. Good-night. There is Peleton coming this way, and Maubranne with him."

"And neither of them is your particular friend. Shall I see you to-morrow evening if the truce lasts as long?"

"That depends on the Cardinal. If he doesn't require me I will be on the Pont Neuf at six, but don't stay after that time," and I walked off quickly, leaving Raoul to enter the courtyard of the palace a little before Peleton and the baron.

The next day Mazarin was invisible to every one except his secretary, but in the afternoon a note bearing his seal was brought to me in my room. Opening it hastily, I read the contents with a feeling of disappointment, as they did away altogether with any chance of a pleasant evening with Raoul.

"You will attend me, well armed and cloaked, at seven o'clock this evening."

"What is in the wind now?" I muttered. "It seems that we have to go outside the Palace at all events. Perhaps the adventure has something to do with my discovery at Martin's house. I pity the astrologer if he has made an enemy of Mazarin."

Serving the Cardinal had at least taught me the value of being punctual, and at seven o'clock precisely I presented myself at the door of his apartment. The Cardinal was dressed like a simple citizen, but over his black mantle he had thrown a long gray cloak, with a portion of which he could muffle his face. His first words filled me with surprise, and, for the moment, with alarm also.

"So your cousin did not appear angry last night at the trick you played him?" he remarked in his broken French; "but you must be careful, I hear he is not over well pleased."

"It seems to me that your Eminence hears everything," I replied bluntly, as soon as my feeling of surprise would allow me to speak.

Putting on his hat, he said with a smile, "To-night, thanks to you, I am going to hear something interesting. Evidently you were born under a lucky star, and I was fortunate in securing your services. Take care of yourself, my friend, for according to the stars our fortunes are bound up together."

It surprised me that so clever a man should believe that the stars had any influence over our lives, but I did not speak my thoughts, though likely enough he knew them, for he could read one's mind like a printed book.

"Come," said he at length; "this way; it is not necessary to advise every one that the Cardinal is about to walk in the city."

Raising the tapestry, he passed into a small corridor, where the faithful Bernouin awaited him.

"Has Belloc made all his arrangements?" asked Mazarin.

"Yes, your Eminence; everything is as you ordered."

"That is well. You will stay up till our return. I am not likely to require more help, but—in case of accidents—here is a signed order for Ferré to turn out the Guards. Do not use it, however, unless it is absolutely necessary."

The secretary bowed, and Mazarin conducted me by a private staircase, the very existence of which was known only to a few people, to the courtyard of the Palace.

"You do not ask where we are going," said he, as we walked along.

"It is not my business, your Eminence," I answered, but I could not help reflecting that Mazarin did not know himself. If the groups of citizens had guessed who my companion was, it is likely that his evening walk would have come to a sudden end.

Now, I have heard Mazarin called a coward who would faint at the sight of blood, but those who said these things spoke without knowledge. Being a man of peace, he disliked bloodshed, but many a boasting gallant would have held back from dangers which the Cardinal faced without hesitation.

On this eventful night he strolled quietly along, brushing shoulders with men who would gladly have slain him, and displaying no sign of nervousness. At the corner of the Pont Neuf he actually stopped to listen to the conversation of some citizens who were holding a kind of open-air parliament, and settling the affairs of the kingdom to their liking.

One fellow especially, dressed like a prosperous shopkeeper, was exceedingly loud in describing his plan to do away with the troubles, and I must admit that the first part of his remedy—the hanging of Mazarin—met with the hearty approval of the crowd.

"A beggarly foreigner!" said one.

"A miserable Italian priest!"

"A grasping, covetous miser!"

"He fancies that the French people were made for the purpose of keeping his nieces like princesses!"

"Well, that is settled!" interrupted the first speaker. "Then, after hanging Mazarin, I would put the Queen in a convent—she has done the country enough mischief."

"That's a grand idea," exclaimed one of the group. "How can a woman rule a country? And, besides, Anne of Austria is only a foreigner!"

I marvelled that Mazarin continued to listen to such stuff, especially as he was risking his life, but he seemed in no hurry to depart, and, indeed, craned his neck forward quite eagerly.

"Next," continued the orator, "we shall require a new regent until the little King is able to take the reins into his own hands."

"True," interrupted one of his listeners, "and who better than the Duke of Orleans?"

"Pouf! Gaston is no use! He blows hot and cold with the same breath. He would send the Queen to a convent, and alter his mind while they were unlocking the gates. No, my friends, we need a man with a strong arm and a stout heart; a leader whom the soldiers love; a general whom the Spaniards fear; a prince of the blood who would make France great, powerful, glorious; the hero of Locroi and Lens, the finest soldier in the world, the great Condé."

The orator finished amidst an outburst of cheering, which was renewed again and again, till hundreds of people were shouting for Condé.

"It is certain," said the Cardinal, turning to me, "that you bring me luck. I will chance another turn of the wheel. Go to that man and tell him the Duc de La Rochefoucauld says he has done splendidly, but that he must not bear so hard on Gaston. Mind that you watch his face closely. I will stay for you yonder in the shadow of the buttress."

Why the Cardinal gave me this strange order I could not guess, but it was none of my business, so, taking the orator aside, I delivered the message word for word. The man's eyes sparkled with joy; he begged me to thank the Duke, and to add that he would remember the hint concerning Gaston of Orleans. More hopelessly perplexed than ever, I returned to Mazarin, and related what had passed, on which he smiled with a satisfied air, and hurried me away.

"A clever rogue whose master should not begrudge him his wages!" he said with a quiet

chuckle, "though he has made one grave mistake to-night. But what extraordinary luck! Surely my star must be in the ascendant! Ah, Martin, my friend, one need not necessarily be an astrologer to foretell the future."

From this speech I gathered two pieces of information. First, that we were on our way to the astrologer's, and second that our visit was in some way mixed up with the knowledge I had already obtained. The scene on the Pont Neuf I did not understand. The Black Mantle who had stirred up the people on behalf of Condé could be no friend to Mazarin, yet the Cardinal had sent me to him with a most astounding message. Then again, every one knew that La Rochefoucauld was Condé's righthand man, but he was supposed to be far away from Paris.

Ah! That gave me a clue, and I looked at Mazarin in amazed wonder. How clever he was! From a hint here and a word there he had discovered that a huge plot was on foot. I did not know the truth till later, but it may as well be set down here.

The Cardinal's enemies found they could accomplish nothing without Condé, but that prince and his brother were in prison. After a great deal of talk it was decided that La Rochefoucauld should visit Paris and stir up the people to demand Condé's release. The Black Mantle on the bridge was no ordinary citizen, but an agent paid by the prince's friends, and Mazarin by his mock message had gone right to the heart of the secret.

This successful stroke had put him in the best of humours, and from time to time he laughed quietly to himself as if enjoying some rich joke. Everywhere the crowd was cheering for Condé, and threatening to hang Mazarin, but my companion proceeded calmly on his journey.

"Through the Rue Croquin," said he presently; "it may be quieter in that direction, and I wish to think."

Unfortunately, about half-way along the street a mob of people, among whom were several Black Mantles, had gathered round a man who offered for sale copies of a song he was singing. He was a sturdy knave with a deep voice, and he sang so lustily that it was impossible to avoid hearing every word.

These songs poured continually from the printing-presses of the Frondeurs, who thought, and perhaps rightly, that an ink-bottle could work more harm than a cannon. Many were witty and laughable, but this one was merely a string of vulgar abuse of the Queen-Mother.

"*Peste*," said I, losing my temper, "these hawkers are becoming too impudent."

"A *Mazarin*!" cried the man next to me. "Down with the *Mazarin*!"

"A fig for Mazarin! He is a man and can defend himself, but Anne of Austria is not only a Queen but a woman. I say shame on the Frenchmen who will let a woman be insulted."

"Monsieur is right," exclaimed one of the Black Mantles quickly; "though I bear no good-will to Anne of Austria."

The speaker who had thus interfered possessed a certain amount of influence; the crowd, instead of rushing forward, remained still; the mutterings died away, and some one, seizing the hawker's papers, trampled them in the mud, and shouted, "Down with Mazarin! Live the Queen!"

Others responded, and, pleased with the new cry, ran off yelling lustily, "Down with Mazarin! Live the Queen!" while the miserable singer, a victim to the fickleness of popular favour, slunk away, muttering beneath his breath.

I do not know how the Cardinal felt at being mixed up in such an adventure, but he behaved like a man of spirit, and stood close at my side throughout the whole affair.

"*Ma foi!*" said he, as we moved on again, "you are not an over-prudent companion. Suppose one of those fellows had plucked at my cloak? I fancy both the Cardinal and his servant would have received but short shrift."

"We should have died for the Queen, my Lord!"

Mazarin shrugged his shoulders and answered drily, "I prefer my friends to live. It is my *enemies* who should get themselves killed. But listen!" and from a distance came a tremendous roar of "Down with Mazarin! Live the Queen!"

"It is strange," muttered the Cardinal, "how these people will cheer for every one but me, yet I have done them more good than all the others put together. But come, unless the stars play me false, these same folk shall raise my name as high as the rest."

"Till the wind blows from a fresh quarter," I muttered, watching the hawker; and, indeed, it seemed to me that Mazarin, though a shrewd man, was striving for an empty honour.

However, there was little leisure for thinking just then; we walked on rapidly, turning to the right at the end of the Rue Croquin, and made our way through several side streets which were nearly deserted. After a long roundabout journey we approached the neighbourhood where

Martin lived, when suddenly an officer whom I recognised as Roland Belloc stepped out from a hiding place.

"Have you posted your soldiers?" asked Mazarin quietly.

"Every avenue is guarded. No one can enter or leave the street unchallenged."

"The men are well out of sight?"

"It would take your Eminence a long time to discover them!" replied the veteran warrior smiling.

"That is well. People who saw them might be curious. There is nothing fresh going on yonder?" and he waved his hand in the direction of Martin's house.

"No, except that we arrived just in time to see Pillot going away."

"Did you secure him?"

"No, my Lord; I had no orders to detain him."

"Chut!" exclaimed Mazarin testily, "you should have acted without orders. By the way, did you know that La Rochefoucauld is in Paris? The game grows very exciting," and he laughed softly at Belloc's astonishment.

"We must strike at once," said the old soldier.

"On the contrary, we will wait till the blow will do the most mischief. That is why I shall spare the good Martin—for a time. Now I am going to pay my visit. There is not much chance of danger, but if the unexpected happens, why, in that case, a Cardinal's life is worth more than that of an astrologer. Eh? my trusty Belloc?"

"Perhaps it will be as well for me to accompany you," said the soldier. "M. de Lalande, here, is a trusty fellow, but after all he is only a boy, and if——"

"The danger, if there be any, will come from the outside," interrupted the Cardinal. "Let your men keep strict watch, and we will take care of ourselves. Come;" and while Belloc slipped into a doorway, we turned the corner and crossed to that side of the street on which the astrologer's house stood.

Using his private signal Mazarin knocked boldly at the door; the window above us opened, and the servant, finding who his master's visitors were, hurried to let us in. The bolts were hastily shot back, the bars lowered, and then the door was thrown open by the obsequious porter, who stood bowing almost to the ground. Several lanterns suspended along the wall shed a dim light through the passage, and a second man, bearing another lantern, hastily came forward to conduct us.

I could not help thinking as we stepped inside, how completely the astrologer held Mazarin in his power!

CHAPTER VIII.

The Plot is Discovered.

"Is your master at home?" asked the Cardinal.

"He is, my Lord," replied the man with a low bow; "but he is unwell, and has retired to rest."

"Ah, my poor Martin, what a misfortune! but lead the way; he will doubtless make an effort to receive an old friend like myself."

While one servant made the door fast, the other went forward with the lantern, and we followed; the Cardinal, a trifle uneasy, glancing keenly from side to side, as if half expecting to meet with some lurking enemy. Everything, however, seemed as usual. The lower part of the house was empty save for a woman cooking some savoury dish, and she took not the slightest notice of us.

The fellow with the lantern opened the door of the astrologer's room, and, lighting several wax candles, requested us to be seated while he informed his master of our presence.

As soon as he had gone, Mazarin ordered me to explore the part screened by the curtains, which I did, sword in hand.

"These conspirators are so crafty," he murmured, "that they make one cautious even in the house of a friend like the worthy Martin."

"The room is empty, your Eminence."

"Ah," said he with a sigh of relief, "then we can look forward with an untroubled mind to meeting our kind host," and, laying aside his hat and cloak, he sat down.

In a short time the astrologer entered the room. He had put on dressing-gown and slippers, and was wearing his black skull-cap. His face, always pale, had become white, there was a constant twitching at the corners of his mouth, and the gray eyes I had thought so calm and powerful, fell beneath the keen gaze of the Cardinal. In spite of his treachery, I pitied the man, and almost found it in my heart to wish I had not observed my cousin and his companion enter the house.

Mazarin, fondling his beard, smiled pleasantly, and begged his host in such soft cooing tones to be seated, that Martin threw off the half-alarmed expression his face had worn.

"So you have been ill, my friend? *Per Baccho*! One can see it in your face. Ah, now I can breathe more freely and laugh at my fears."

I was standing between the table and the door, but in such a position as to be able to watch the old man's face.

"Fears, my lord?" he murmured questioningly.

"Yes, yes, I was foolish enough to doubt your—vigilance."

He purposely made a long pause between the last two words, during which Martin sat like a man waiting to be hanged; then he recovered himself and actually smiled.

"Something has happened without my knowledge," said he briskly.

"Without your knowledge, truly, my dear Martin, or you would have sent me word. As it is, I have to inform you that Paris has had a distinguished visitor."

Martin went deathly pale again and murmured, "Surely it cannot be——"

"Oh, no," interrupted Mazarin, smiling, "the Prince still occupies his prison at Havre. But La Rochefoucauld is here to represent him. If you go into the city you will hear the people crying for the release of Condé. They are not aware how comfortable he is. But you will not go!"

"Why not, my lord?"

"Because I have need of you. We must put our heads together, and unravel the mysteries of this plot. The matter is serious; all my enemies seem to be in league. Come now, do you fancy De Retz has been bought?"

I really felt sorry for the poor wretch with whom the Cardinal thus played as a cat plays with a mouse.

"De Retz?" he stammered. "I should think it very likely; the others could accomplish nothing without him, because he controls the mob."

"It is very unfortunate. You are aware he wishes to become a Cardinal, and now he will lose his chance. The red hat would have suited him well, but I must give it to Rivière, the bosom friend of Orleans. But perhaps even the Duke has been gained? What do you think, my dear Martin?" and the purring cat suddenly became a hissing serpent.

The unhappy astrologer bent his head.

"They must have secured him," he gasped like a man choking. "They would not dare to move without his support."

"And the king of the markets?" asked Mazarin, who thus scornfully referred to the Duke of Beaufort.

"He has powerful friends. His help would be valuable if there really is a conspiracy."

Leaning back in his chair, Mazarin stroked his beard thoughtfully. Presently he began to purr, a sure sign that he had regained his composure.

"This union (which he pronounced *onion*) of parties is very touching," said he, "yet in the interests of His Majesty it must be broken up," and he looked so fixedly at Martin that the latter was compelled to meet his gaze.

"How say you?" he continued, "would that little monkey of a priest rise to the bait of a Cardinal's hat?"

"It is probable, my Lord! That is, if the hat were a real one," at which Mazarin laughed loudly.

"*Per Baccho!*" exclaimed he, "we would not attempt to deceive so skilful a plotter. Then that is settled! A cardinal's hat for De Retz, and you shall make him our offer. But he must accept quickly; in twenty-four hours it will be too late. I am sorry to drag you from your sick bed, but the King's interests are above all."

"Come," thought I, "it promises to turn out not so badly. Mazarin must be a good fellow in the main, to let the astrologer off so lightly."

Martin, too, shared my satisfaction, especially when the Cardinal rose as if to depart. But the play-acting was not yet finished. I was moving towards the door when Mazarin suddenly sat down again.

"I had almost forgotten," said he softly, "and yet it is very important. I am about to set you a difficult task, my friend! no one else could do it, but then you are so wonderfully clever. Sit down and write a list of all those likely to have joined in this plot—men and women—the powerful and the insignificant; do not leave out one. And if you can make a guess what each has promised the other, put that in also. It will be interesting to see if our guesses are alike."

Still Martin did not break down, but his voice was very unsteady as he replied, "You over-rate my powers, my Lord, it would be impossible to do as you wish."

"You may have some papers which will help you," said Mazarin quietly. "Look them over, my friend, I can wait."

At that the wretched man's courage forsook him, and, realising that his treachery was discovered, he flung himself at Mazarin's feet, crying, "Pardon me, Monseigneur, and you shall be told everything, but I have not the papers."

"Who has them?"

"Madame Coutance! She promised to obtain the signature of the King's uncle."

"That woman mixes herself up in everything," exclaimed Mazarin, irritably, "and does more harm by her folly than De Retz can manage by his scheming. She must be kept quiet for a month or two. De Lalande, ask M. Belloc to station a carriage, six troopers, and a spare horse at the corner of the Rue Crillon, and to remain there till he receives fresh orders."

I bowed, and leaving the room, hurried downstairs, where one of the men undid the fastenings of the door.

"Do not replace the bar till my return," I said, "I shall be away a short time only."

Belloc, who was watching from his hiding-place, perceived me immediately, and crossed the street.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously. "Has anything gone wrong?"

"No," said I, and delivered Mazarin's message.

"Rue Crillon?" he exclaimed. "That is where Madame Coutance lives."

"She is mixed up in the plot which Mazarin has discovered. I am sorry for her niece."

"Mazarin will do the maid no harm," exclaimed the old soldier. "I have always found his bark worse than his bite. Are you sure that he is quite safe yonder?"

"Everything appears as usual."

"Still, in case you are sent on another message, it will be as well that the Cardinal has some protection," and he gave a private signal which quickly brought two soldiers to our side.

"You are under the orders of M. de Lalande," he exclaimed, and, leaving me to return to the house, hurried off.

"Affairs go well," said the Cardinal briskly, as I entered the room, "and the credit is yours, M. de Lalande. But for your sharp eyes I might have failed to get on the track of this conspiracy against the King. There is one thing more for you to do. Take this note to Madame Coutance in the Rue Crillon. It is a request by our dear Martin that she will give up the papers relating to the plot. You will pass them to M. Belloc with orders to bring them here at once."

"Suppose the lady refuses to surrender them, my Lord?"

"You will search her room, while this *lettre de cachet* will secure her a lodging in the Bastille. If, on the other hand, she has the good sense to yield quietly, you will simply escort her to her chateau. The carriage will be in readiness."

I told him of the soldiers stationed in the corridor, and once more left the house. The night

was growing late, and the streets, in spite of the *falots* filled with burning pitch, and the dingy lamps suspended by chains passing from one side of the road to the other, were almost in darkness.

But Paris was wide awake and unduly excited. Swarms of people of the lowest class, unkempt, ragged, and frowsy, but all armed in some fashion, were prowling around intent on mischief, and cheering for De Retz. Bands of Black Mantles, grave and preoccupied as became owners of property, guarded the shops, in dread equally of the *canaille* and the nobles.

These last swaggered about showing off their finery, singing noisily, and occasionally compelling the passers-by to cheer for Condé. Now and again a coach, preceded by lackeys bearing flambeaux, would roll by, conveying ladies of distinction to or from some brilliant assembly.

At the corner of the Rue Crillon I looked for M. Belloc, but some time passed before he appeared, and then I could see nothing of a carriage.

"In the yard of the 'Plume of Feathers,'" said he, in answer to my question; "it would attract too much attention standing here. Paris is in a turmoil to-night. I do not like the signs. The people are restless without knowing why, though there is some talk of Condé's returning."

"The Cardinal has first to unlock the door," I replied, at which the old warrior smiled grimly, thinking such a proceeding on Mazarin's part very unlikely.

"Why is the carriage required?" he asked.

"To convey Madame Coutance either to the Bastille or to her own place at Aunay. It is a troublesome business," and I explained just what my orders were.

"Better get it over at once," he suggested, "it will be none the pleasanter for delay;" so, putting a bold face on the matter, I walked to the door of the house, and inquired for Madame Coutance.

"She is not at home, monsieur," replied the porter. "Both the ladies went out early this evening with Madame de Chevreuse."

I put several further questions, but the porter was either a very stupid man or a very faithful servant—he knew nothing, and I had to retire baffled.

"They will return soon," said my companion, when I rejoined him, "unless madame has received a hint of her danger."

"That is hardly probable! Even Mazarin had no suspicion until an hour ago. But he will begin to wonder if anything has gone wrong."

At the end of half an hour a carriage drew up before the door, and Marie and her aunt descended. They stood for a moment on the top of the steps, and then, as the vehicle passed on, entered the house.

Leaving our post of observation, we crossed the road, and the servant, showing us into an ante-room, went to announce my name.

"Get it over quickly," whispered M. Belloc, as the man returned. "Most likely there will be a few tears, but you must not mind those."

I did not feel particularly happy as I followed the servant along the corridor. The errand was far from my liking, and I would rather have stormed a breach; but, as I ate Mazarin's bread, it was my duty to obey his orders.

The ladies were seated in a small but luxuriously appointed room, and Madame Coutance welcomed me with embarrassing warmth.

"The hour is somewhat late," she said, "but I expect the Cardinal keeps your time fully occupied. You do not favour us with much of your company."

"I am very unwilling to be here now," I blurted out, not knowing what else to say. "The fact is, I have come on an unwelcome errand," and, producing Martin's note, added, "that will explain the object of my visit."

I scarcely dared glance at Marie, who remained very still while her aunt was reading.

M. Belloc had warned me to expect a few tears, but, instead of weeping, Madame Coutance launched into an angry speech against Mazarin, whom she called a wicked and infamous man, and concluded by a blunt refusal to surrender any papers whatever.

"But," I suggested feebly, being overwhelmed by her torrent of words, "you have no choice in the matter, madame. Unless you give me this list of your own free will, my orders are to lodge you in the Bastille, and to search your rooms."

"And if my aunt yields the papers?" asked Marie, who, I fancy, was rather alarmed at the mention of the Bastille.

"In that case, mademoiselle, the affair ends with a trip to Aunay. A carriage is outside, and in ten minutes we leave for one place or the other."

"Come, *ma chère*," said the girl soothingly, "you must submit. Life in the Bastille cannot be nearly as pleasant as at Aunay."

Madame Coutance opened a desk which stood in a corner of the tiny room, and drew out a roll of paper.

"There is what your master wants!" she exclaimed angrily, "but let him take care; it will be our turn soon."

"Do you accompany us to Aunay?" asked Marie.

"Yes, with an escort of troopers; for all the world as if you were two desperate prisoners. I am really sorry, but perhaps you will object less to me than to some rough soldier."

"Indeed we shall," she replied. "When do we start?"

"As soon as madame is ready," I answered. "The Cardinal likes not delay."

"In an hour then, though I do not care for travelling by night."

"The carriage is roomy and comfortable; there is no danger, and perhaps you will be able to sleep on the journey."

Bowing to the ladies, I rejoined Belloc, who was waiting impatiently in the ante-room.

"Well?" he exclaimed.

"It is all right. Here is the paper, and we leave for Aunay in an hour. I am not looking forward with any pleasure to the journey, I can assure you!"

"You are obeying orders," said he, taking the paper. "Now I must return to the Cardinal; and, by the by, take care of yourself! The troopers will be sufficient protection against robbers, but, should you meet with any of Condé's friends, you may have to fight."

"I hope not, at least until the ladies are safely disposed of."

Wishing me good-bye, he walked away at a rapid pace, while I, glad of the chance to divert my thoughts, paid a visit to the inn. The troopers, who were in charge of a grizzled sergeant, had dismounted, and were amusing themselves in a small room looking into the courtyard. The sergeant saluted, listened respectfully to my order, and accompanied me to inspect the carriage and horses.

"Are we going far, monsieur?"

"Two or three days' journey. I hope you can depend on your men? The ride may not be altogether a holiday jaunt."

"I chose them myself, monsieur. They would as soon fight as eat, and have all been in many a rough scrimmage."

"They may be in another before long!" said I, remembering M. Belloc's words; and then, bidding him have all in readiness, I returned to the house, wishing that Mazarin had entrusted this particular commission to any but myself.

Yet, after all, the Cardinal had acted very generously. There was really no great hardship in being sent to one's country seat, and I suspected that Marie would rather enjoy the change. As to her aunt, she would find it irksome, being a woman who could not live without excitement of some sort.

Presently the carriage rumbled to the door, and jumping up, I hurried into the hall, nearly falling over the servants, who were carrying rugs and shawls and various packages to the main entrance. When the parcels were stowed away, I stepped forward to assist the ladies into the coach, but Madame Coutance, who was still very sulky, haughtily declined my proffered help. However, I saw them safely in, had the leathern coverings let down to exclude the night air, posted the troopers in front of the carriage, mounted the spare horse—a splendid animal by the way—and gave the word for the gate St. Denis.

It was fortunate that the ladies had prevented an earlier start. Although late, numerous citizens were still abroad, and their curiosity made them troublesome. Twice the troopers were compelled to clear a way for the coach by force, and, had the streets been more crowded, we should never have reached the gate.

"Down with Mazarin! To the lamp-post with the *Mazarins*!" yelled the people, but at sight of the grim sergeant and his stalwart troopers their courage oozed away. These night-birds were mostly followers of De Retz, but occasionally we met with a swaggering young noble or two wearing the colours of the great Condé.

At the gate we were stopped by the officer on duty, who refused to let us pass, quoting an order from the Duke of Orleans to prevent all persons from leaving the city. Even after inspecting my papers, which were signed by the Queen, he hesitated, declaring the Duke's commands were strict.

"As you please," said I, "only remember that Gaston of Orleans is not King yet, and you will be guilty of the crime of high treason. Unless the gates are opened within five minutes, I shall return to the Palais Royal."

The officer was a brave man, and had he served any other master would doubtless have stood his ground, but no one could depend on Gaston. As likely as not, if any trouble arose, the Duke would throw over his own servant, and expose him to the vengeance of Mazarin.

"Come," I said, when half the time had passed, "which is it to be? Will you take your orders from the Queen or from the Duke?"

At the last minute, though still grumbling, he permitted us to continue the journey, and the coach passed outside the city walls. For several miles we rode forward slowly, till the dawn of another day began to appear in the sky; then we quickened the pace, as I was anxious to get as far away from Paris as possible. It was scarcely likely that any one would attempt a rescue, but so many foolish things were done in those days that I did not feel at all secure.

The road along which we travelled was lonely and deserted, the country looked very desolate, and even after the sun had risen there were few people to be observed abroad. At that time I did not know what I afterwards learned, that our route lay through a district which had been swept bare again and again by the horrors of war.

CHAPTER IX.

I Meet with an Exciting Adventure.

About nine o'clock we came to a country inn where I decided to halt, and the troopers, well pleased at the prospect of refreshment, proceeded to stable the horses, while the hostess showed madame and her niece into the best room of the house. The arrival of such a large party caused some consternation, but the host and his servants bustled about cheerfully, and the soldiers were soon sitting down to a rough but abundant meal.

Having seen them satisfactorily settled, I was debating whether to intrude myself on the ladies or not, when the innkeeper informed me that they desired to see me. Accordingly, after speaking a word to the sergeant, I went upstairs, and entered the room where they sat at table.

Madame Coutance, who shortly before had sulked like a spoiled child, had now regained her good humour, and received me with smiles.

"Come, Sir Gaoler, it is not polite to keep your guests waiting," she exclaimed, and I excused myself on the ground of being uncertain whether my presence would be agreeable.

"Certainly! we require you as a taster. The Duke of Beaufort was allowed one at Vincennes, and you would not count him of more consequence than two ladies?"

"I' faith!" I exclaimed, glancing at the viands, "if I am to play that part, there will be little for those who come after me. The night's ride has given me a wolf's appetite!"

"In that case," said Marie laughing, "we will be our own tasters. Sit down, Albert, and let us begin."

For some reason best known to herself, or perhaps for no reason at all, Madame Coutance had become reconciled to the situation. I was received into favour again. We laughed and joked merrily, and resumed the journey in the best of good humour. The leathern coverings were fastened back, and I rode beside the open carriage more as an attendant cavalier than as the officer of an escort. This was far more agreeable to me, though I found it rather awkward to answer some of the questions which madame asked concerning the Cardinal.

"It is a pity the plot was discovered," she said; "in a day or two at the outside Mazarin would have been lost."

"Condé is still in prison," I remarked meaningly.

"He will soon be free. The people are rising, and Mazarin will not dare to keep him in captivity. Ah, my friend, the tables will be turned then!"

"I wish these useless squabbles were at an end," said Marie.

"Have patience, child," exclaimed her aunt, "all will come right in time," and, turning to me, she added, "how long am I expected to remain at Aunay?"

"The Cardinal mentioned a month or two."

"Good faith!" she exclaimed with a toss of her head, "the Cardinal will be over the borders before then!"

"It may be so," I admitted, not anxious to dispute the point.

We were still several miles from Aunay, when the sergeant, who rode with two men in the rear, trotted forward briskly, and reining up my horse, I waited for the soldier to speak.

"Are we likely to be pursued, monsieur?" asked he.

"It is just possible. Why?"

"Because there are a score of horsemen on our track. Pierre, who has keen sight, declares they are cavaliers, young bloods most likely, from Paris."

In a few minutes they came within sight, and, as they approached more closely, I recognised that Pierre's description was correct. They certainly were not ordinary soldiers, and the only doubt remaining was whether they were friends or foes.

The grizzled sergeant decided the question for me.

"Frondeurs, monsieur," he announced with the utmost coolness.

"Then they intend to rescue our prisoners. Can we throw them off?"

"We can try, monsieur, but they will probably overtake us in ten minutes."

"Then we must fight, though the odds are terribly against us."

"As monsieur pleases; we have only to obey orders," and without another word he recalled the soldiers who were in advance.

"What is it?" cried Madame Coutance, excitedly, as I returned to the carriage, "what has happened?"

"Nothing as yet," I answered smiling; "but some of your party have followed us from Paris. For what purpose I leave you to guess."

She clapped her hands and laughed like a child; it just suited her to be the central figure in any kind of adventure.

"A rescue!" she cried. "Marie, do you hear? Our brave cavaliers think we are being dragged to prison, and have come to rescue us. Ah, the fine fellows! How vexed Mazarin will be! Perhaps he imagined I had no friends!"

"Their folly can only do harm, madame," I replied.

"Chut! what absurdity! It is a rich joke, and Scarron shall make a song about it. How they will laugh when I explain that we are going to Aunay and not to prison!"

During this conversation Marie, had remained silent, but now in a low voice she asked, "Are there many, Albert?"

"A score, perhaps," I replied; "but do not be alarmed. As your aunt says, they will probably regard the venture as a rich joke. Now I must go to my men," and I ordered the coachman to drive on rapidly.

The six troopers rode three abreast behind the coach, which rattled along swiftly, while the sergeant and I followed. Each instant brought our pursuers nearer, and it soon became evident that they were able to ride us down.

"Pardon, monsieur," said the sergeant, "but if there is to be a fight we had better get it over. At present we are only spoiling our horses."

"True," I replied, and called on the troopers to halt.

The cavaliers were advancing at a gallop. Foremost of the throng rode my cousin Henri and

Baron Maubranne, while close in their rear pressed Peleton, and half a dozen horsemen with whose features I was unacquainted. Behind these again came several men whom I had met at Perret's—Armand d'Arçy, Lautrec, and finally, Raoul.

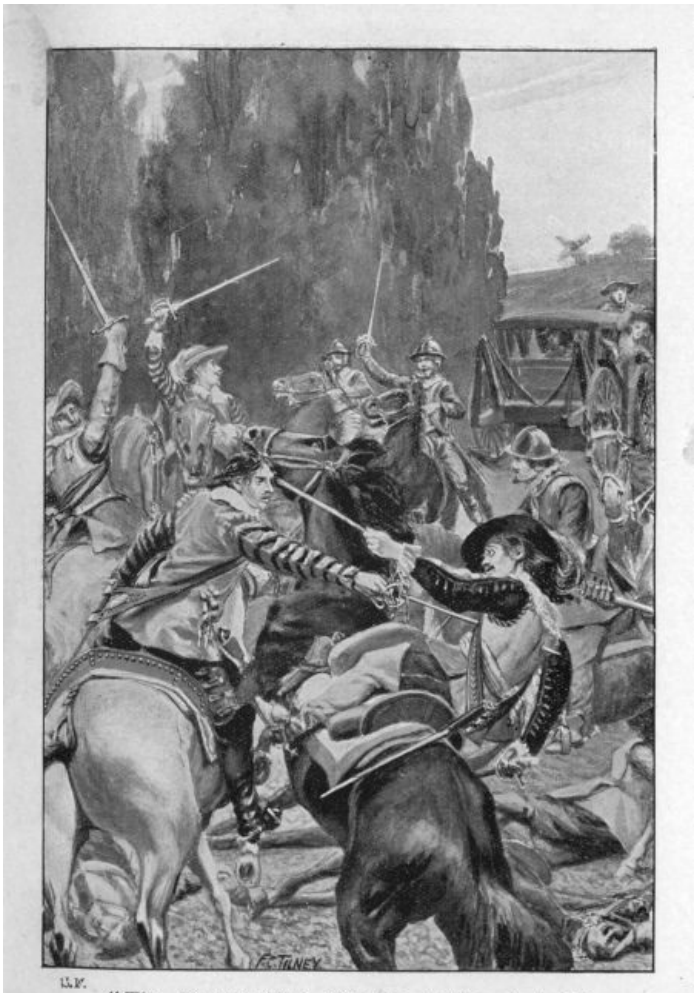
The sword trembled in my hand, and my heart sank on recognising Raoul. How could I fight against the staunch comrade who had always been dearer to me than a brother? It was impossible. For the sake of our friendship I must endeavour to avert a struggle.

The Frondeurs, I gladly believe, would have listened to reason but for Peleton and Baron Maubranne, who, with raised swords, rushed at me, yelling "Down with the *Mazarin*!"

In self-defence I was compelled to parry their blows, and Peleton, lunging rather wildly, received the point of my sword in his chest. At this the cavaliers, headed by Maubranne, charged us in a body, but my troopers withstood the shock manfully, and the baron rolled to the ground.

At the first clash of swords all thoughts of peace took wing; the intoxication of the fight got into our blood, and made us reckless. Spurring into the throng, I called on my men, who attacked with such zest that the cavaliers began to give way.

Henri, however, quickly rallied them; the fight was renewed with increased fury, and the air was filled with the clatter of steel and the shouts of the combatants.



"The air was filled with the clatter of steel."

"The air was filled with the clatter of steel."

The old sergeant had not praised his men without cause. They were seasoned soldiers, hard and tough as iron, and without the least sense of fear. Fighting was their trade, and they were masters of the craft.

As for myself, I could ride, and handle a sword, but this was my first experience of a fight. I forgot the lessons in sword-play my father had taught me, and struck out wildly, hitting right and left. I saw D'Arçy's smiling face go down before me, felt Lautrec's sword pierce my arm, and then came directly in front of Raoul.

As it chanced I was able to stay my hand at the very moment of striking, but Raoul, poor lad, had not the same good fortune, and, just as I lowered my weapon, his sword passed through my body. I am an old man now, but I can still see the look of horror on his face, and hear his cry of anguish. I remember smiling at him feebly and trying to speak; then the fading daylight vanished, and with the darkness came unconsciousness.

The next thing I can remember was Raoul asking some one if I should die. Not being able to

see him I stretched out my hand, and he, bending over me, spoke my name softly.

"My men?" I whispered faintly.

"They are all living! Do you know who I am?"

"Yes. Raoul."

"If you do not go away, M. Beauchamp, you will kill my patient."

This was said in a voice soft and sweet as a child's, and I concluded the speaker was a doctor. Raoul made some reply, but I could not understand his words, and gradually my sense of hearing failed altogether. For weeks I lay hovering between life and death, and when at length I was able to look about me and realise something of what went on, I was painfully weak and helpless.

Thrice every day there came into my room a tall, grave, white-bearded man, who sometimes smiled kindly, but more often shook his head in a sorrowful manner. And always, throughout the day and night, there sat by my bedside a grief-stricken youth who tended me with the utmost care. This youth, so sad and melancholy, was Raoul, but Raoul so altered as to be scarcely recognisable. For hours he would sit motionless as a statue, then, rising gently, he would give me the medicine according to the doctor's orders, or smooth the tumbled pillow which I was helpless to re-arrange for myself.

One morning, waking after a long sleep, I felt considerably better. My comrade sat as usual beside the bed, but, wearied by the night watch, his head had sunk on his breast, and he had fallen asleep. I half turned to look at him more closely, but at the first movement he started up wide awake.

"Raoul!" I whispered.

"Albert!"

"It is all right, old friend; I shall get on now."

Grasping my hand, which lay outside the coverlet, he pressed it gently, and, kneeling down, gave thanks to God for this first step in my recovery.

"Amen to that," said I. "And now, my dear Raoul, tell me the news. Remember that I am ignorant of everything."

"First let me hear you say that you forgive me."

"Forgive you, old comrade? *Peste!* there is nothing to forgive. Is it your fault that I am the less skilful hand with the sword?"

"That is nonsense," he replied slowly. "You could have killed me, but you refused to strike."

"Friendship stayed my arm in time."

"But not mine!"

"Then after all I am the more skilful swordsman!"

"I nearly killed you," he said, and his lip quivered.

"But not quite. Let us forget all about it."

From that morning I began to regain strength, and could soon converse with Raoul without fatigue. From him I learned that the safety of the troopers was due to Marie, who, leaving the carriage, and running to the scene of the fight, had called upon the Frondeurs to sheathe their swords.

"Two of your men were wounded, though not seriously," said Raoul; "young D'Arçy received a nasty cut; Maubranne was picked up insensible, and Peleton will not forget you for some time."

"But for him and Maubranne, there need not have been a fight."

"They have a spite against you, and will make mischief if they can."

"Never mind them. What became of the escort?"

"The wounded men were taken to the inn; the others returned to Paris. Madame Coutance insisted on your being brought to Aunay, and here you have remained ever since."

"Then really," I said, when Raoul gave me this information, "you have all done your best to fulfil Mazarin's orders!"

"It was a mistake. We believed the ladies were to be imprisoned at Reuil, and, besides, it was possible that Madame Coutance had possession of a valuable document."

"You should have searched the Palais Royal for that," I remarked with a laugh.

"You have spoiled our scheme for a time. Your cousin did the Fronde an ill turn when he advised you to go to Paris; you have proved a thorn in our side from the very first day."

I asked after D'Arçy, and found that he had returned with his friends to the capital, where new and startling plots were being hatched.

"Without a doubt we shall crush the Cardinal this time," exclaimed my comrade, whose good spirits revived with my increasing strength. "He will miss his trusty henchman, and there is really no one of importance on his side."

"Then De Retz has not received his red hat?"

"No! Mazarin played him a fine trick over that, and set all Paris laughing for weeks. The little abbé is desperately angry, and intends taking ample vengeance."

"How Marie's aunt must wish she were back in the Rue Crillon!"

"She has vowed not to leave Aunay till you have recovered. The doctor declares you owe your life to her and Marie, who nursed you during the first fortnight. By the way, your doublet was spoiled; so I sent for another; you shall put it on in the morning."

"To go downstairs?'

"If you can persuade the doctor to grant you permission. And now try to sleep, or you will be ill again."

The doctor appeared rather reluctant next morning to give his consent, but I begged so hard that at last he yielded, and Raoul helped me to dress. Then, leaning on the arm of my comrade, and partly supported by the medical man, I made my way to the drawing-room, where the ladies gave me a hearty welcome. The disagreeable part I had played in carrying out Mazarin's orders was forgotten; Madame Coutance could talk only about the fight, and her niece about my wounds.

"Between you all," I said, "you have saved my life."

"Next to God you have the doctor and Raoul to thank," remarked Marie.

"Raoul certainly," exclaimed her aunt laughing. "But for his sword-cut in the first place we could not have nursed you at all."

"It was, indeed, very kind of you," I replied, ignoring the first part of her speech, "especially as I am in the pay of the hated Mazarin."

"That is nothing, absolutely nothing. We are winning, and can afford to be generous. The Cardinal stands on the edge of a mine which will shortly explode. De Retz and your cousin Henri have made things certain this time; there will be no more mistakes."

There was something in her speech and manner which made me wonder why she was so bitter against the Cardinal. My recent adventures had taught me valuable lessons, and I knew that many of those who talked so loudly of liberty and justice had their own private schemes to advance at the expense of the public welfare; and I was half-inclined to think that Marie's aunt was a Frondeuse of this description. However, she was very kind to me, and I still look back on those early days of my recovery with a certain amount of pleasure.

From the date of my leaving home I had lived at high pressure, in a maze of intrigue and strife. My wits, such as they were, had ever been employed; my life had been in danger a score of times. The calm which followed this incessant scheming and fighting was delicious, and I did not feel very sorry that Raoul had given me a dig with his sword.

Though sorely needed by his patron, he refused to leave Aunay as long as I was in the slightest danger; the ladies treated me like a brother, while the doctor spared neither time nor trouble to bring about the restoration of my health. It was new to me to be thus petted, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Madame would not hear of my going home.

"That would be a fine thing indeed!" she exclaimed banteringly. "I mean to claim the credit of your recovery. But as soon as your strength returns you shall write, and I will provide a messenger to deliver your letter."

"My mother will be anxious," I said. "No doubt Belloc has told her something of what has happened."

"Make yourself easy on that head," exclaimed Raoul. "I thought of that, and sent D'Arçy to caution him. He will only mention that you have met with a slight accident."

This was very thoughtful as well as kind of my comrade, and I thanked him heartily.

Three weeks after my first coming downstairs, he took his departure for the capital. His patron had already sent him several urgent messages, and now that the doctor had pronounced me out of danger he felt it his duty to go.

"We are nearing the end," said he; "and the Duke has need of all his friends. Mazarin may make a desperate effort, but I prophesy that by the time you are well he will be dead or banished."

"In either case Paris will be no place for me, and I shall return to the farm."

"Not at all," he answered earnestly. "I shall speak to the Duke, and he will take you into his service."

Unwilling to vex him, I let the subject drop, though not having the slightest intention of joining the Cardinal's enemies. So I hobbled into the courtyard to witness his departure, and echoed his farewell, "Till we meet again," as he passed through the gateway.

At first I missed him a great deal, but each succeeding day increased my strength; I was able to walk alone, and altogether felt very comfortable. Either by myself or accompanied by the ladies I took the air on the terrace, or, wandering through the charming grounds, strolled by the margin of the silvery stream skirting the chateau.

The bitter strife of clashing interests, the tumult and horrors of the capital, did not extend to this peaceful spot; it might have been the heart of another country. The peasants were courteous and respectful, toiling patiently like oxen in yoke. As yet they had not learned their power, and the noble was still a master to be obeyed without murmur or complaint. Much to her aunt's annoyance, Marie went among them, smiling pleasantly, speaking kind words, bearing help to the distressed, soothing the sick, and treating them all, in fact, like human beings. At Aunay she was really happy, and her face wore an expression of content which one never saw in Paris.

"I could wish to live in the country always," she remarked once, "it is so peaceful after noisy, brawling Paris."

So the days glided by till there came to us in the chateau strange echoes of the outside world. The wildest rumours were repeated by the gentry of the neighbouring estates. One day we heard Condé was marching on Paris with ten thousand soldiers; the next that he had been poisoned in his cell at Havre. Some asserted that Mazarin, having made peace with De Retz, had triumphed over all his enemies, others that Orleans had hanged the Cardinal out of hand.

These tales agitated Madame Coutance, and I knew she longed to be back in the midst of the storm. While I remained at Aunay this was impossible, but, in spite of her desire, she would not let me depart.

"You will become a vegetable at Vançey," she said, "and I want to push your fortunes. Mazarin must soon be beaten, and you shall join the great prince. I have influence with him, and will use it."

Thanking her warmly, I pointed out that, having pledged my word to Mazarin, I could not accept the prince's favours.

"Bah!" she exclaimed, "no one can help a fallen favourite!"

"Then there is the Queen-Mother; I cannot range myself among her enemies."

"You are very simple," said madame smiling. "Anne of Austria has no enemies; we all bow to her and the little King. Condé is her chief friend," and with that she went away, leaving me to think over the matter.

CHAPTER X.

Pillot to the Rescue.

Every day now the rumour of Mazarin's defeat grew louder, but, knowing the man well, I doubted if all France could disturb his position. And though I felt little personal liking for the Cardinal, it seemed to me that the country was safer in his hands than it would be in the hands of those opposed to him.

De Retz, a noisy brawler, stirred up the mob in his own interests; Gaston of Orleans, unstable as water, was a mere shuttle-cock tossed to and fro by any strong man who chose to make use of

him; Condé, though a brave and skilful general, already grasped more power than a subject should possess. Between them they had turned Paris into a hot-bed of rebellion and discontent.

I was musing over these things one evening when a horseman came at walking pace into the courtyard of the chateau. The animal appeared tired out, and the man himself was covered with dust and dirt.

"A special messenger from Paris," I muttered, and, going forward, recognised Pillot, whom I had treated so scurvily at the inn.

The little man displayed no malice, but his eyes twinkled as he slipped from the back of his exhausted horse.

"You have ridden fast," I remarked, and, calling a servant, ordered him to give the animal a good feed and a rub down.

"Thanks, monsieur, he deserves it. A plague on these troublesome journeys. Why do people live outside Paris, I wonder?"

Laughing at the question, I inquired if he had come to see me.

"No, monsieur; this is an unexpected pleasure," and he showed his teeth in a broad grin. "I have brought a letter certainly, but this time there can be no mistake, as it is for a lady."

"If it is for Madame Coutance, you had better come to the house."

Madame had just returned from riding with Marie, but she at once received the messenger, and then sent him to obtain some much-needed refreshment. Breaking the seal, she read the letter hurriedly, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"It is from Henri!" she exclaimed, excitedly, "and contains startling news. The old fox is beaten at last! De Retz has declared for Condé, who will soon take the reins into his own hands."

"Is Gaston left out in the cold?"

"*Pouf!* Henri doesn't even mention him; he is only a puppet."

"But he has a strong party!"

"Young scatter-brains like Raoul Beauchamp and Armand d'Arçy! Nice boys, but nothing more. Marie, we must go to the court to congratulate the Queen on her freedom."

"Or rather on her change of masters!" laughed the girl.

Later in the evening I went to find Pillot. Having eaten and drunk well, Henri's messenger was in a good temper, and willing to inform me of the most recent events.

"It is time to make a fresh move, monsieur," he said mockingly. "With so many brave Frenchmen to lead us we have no need of a beggarly foreigner. The first step was to join our forces, which made us so strong that Mazarin fled. By now, no doubt, Condé is out of prison."

"Then you are all friends together! How long will that last?"

"How long, monsieur? What a question!"

"Till you come to divide the spoils, I suppose?"

Pillot's eyes twinkled, and he answered roguishly, "Monsieur has learned the ways of the world. It is true thieves often quarrel over their booty, but on the other hand they do not share it with their victim's friends."

"What does that mean?"

"Simply that Paris at present is not a suitable place for a *Mazarin*. While dogs are growling over a bone, they are apt to snap at a passer-by."

"One should wait till they have turned to fighting among themselves," I remarked.

"If one has the patience, monsieur!"

"Oh, the quarrel soon begins. In less than a month's time you will be flying at each other's throats, and Mazarin will return with more power than ever."

"You are mistaken there, monsieur. Whatever else happens, we have finished with the Italian. Were he to set foot in Paris again, the people would tear him limb from limb."

"I suppose De Retz pays you well for your services?"

"I have little to do with the Abbé now," he said. "I am in the service of monsieur's cousin, and

a man could have no better master."

That night when the household had retired to rest, I sat at my bedroom window looking out over the park. It was a beautiful scene; everything was hushed and still, and the quiet earth lay bathed in silvery moonlight. Pillot's talk had set me thinking. My wound had completely healed, and I felt strong enough to take a further part in the struggle. The situation was, however, puzzling. Mazarin's downfall had left me without a patron, and I could not join his enemies, most of whom, utterly and heartlessly selfish, cared for nothing but their own welfare. Their senseless squabbles were dragging France through the mire, and I longed to see my country strong and powerful.

From the dwarf's remarks I gathered that Condé intended going to Paris as the Queen's friend, but this could be nothing more than play-acting of the flimsiest character. It was as if a housebreaker took it upon himself to protect the building he had just robbed.

Reflecting calmly on these matters, I saw my duty plain. The Lady Anne was the natural guardian of the young King, and she required the aid of every honest Frenchman till her son became of an age to rule for himself. Reasoning thus, I resolved to set out straightway for Paris, and, having made up my mind, I closed the window and went to bed.

As soon as Madame Coutance heard of my intention she urged me to stay longer, but the look of relief in her eyes showed she was really pleased at my resolve. The country wearied her; she was eager to return to the old life, and after my departure there would be no necessity for her to remain at Aunay.

"We must make the most of Albert to-day, *ma chère*," she exclaimed brightly. "The house will be positively gloomy without him."

"When do you start?" asked Marie.

"To-morrow at day-break. I am strong enough now to use a sword, and the Queen-Mother has not too many friends around her."

Marie sighed. "I am tired of a contest in which selfishness plays so large a part," she remarked.

"Yet it is distinctly droll," observed her aunt. "For example, here is Albert, anxious to serve the Queen, while his cousin does his best for De Retz. On the other hand I wish to help the prince, while our friend Raoul takes orders from the King's uncle. Oh, it is a charming play!"

"Meanwhile the people die of starvation!" said Marie.

"That is unfortunate, certainly. But what would you? There must always be some to suffer."

"It is the people now; it will be the turn of the nobles later. The peasants won't always stand being ground down and starved," I said.

"Chut! my dear Albert, you talk like a carter. What have the people to do with us beyond cultivating our land? You should join De Retz, who intends doing so much for the *canaille* in the future."

"The very distant future," I said drily, and she laughed.

Personally she cared no more for the people than for the oxen on her estate, and said so openly.

During the afternoon I went for a turn in the park with Marie, when, strolling as far as the rivulet, we sat for a while on its bank. It was good to drink in the calm beauty of this scene, so utterly different from any Paris could offer; and the memory of it returned to me long afterwards, when, faint with hunger, and weary with fighting, I lay amid the dead and dying on a stricken battle-field. In the lengthening shadows we returned to the house, little dreaming what strange events would happen before we next wandered together in the park at Aunay.

It was not a cheerful evening, though madame laughed and said many smart things, in her brilliant way, to raise our spirits. At length she rose to retire to her own room.

"I will not say 'good-bye,'" she exclaimed saucily, "as we are certain to meet again. If you act on my advice it will be in the palace of Condé. The prince loves a lad of mettle."

"Albert must consult his own honour," said Marie.

"And ruin his prospects for an empty whim! Don't listen to her, Albert, and above all things, don't let Mazarin drag you down. Keep constantly in your mind that he has had his day, and will never return to power. Last of all, remember you are always welcome in the Rue Crillon, whether fortune treat you well or ill."

When they had gone I sent for Pillot, who was still in the house. Food and rest had performed wonders for the little man, who looked as jaunty and self-possessed as ever.

"Has your horse recovered?" I asked.

"Perfectly, monsieur."

"I am starting for the capital at day-break. If you care to ride with me, I shall be glad of your company."

"Monsieur honours me!" said he, making a bow.

"Then tell the servants to prepare you an early breakfast, and join me in the courtyard at seven."

"I shall be there, monsieur," and the rascal tripped off smiling, while I, taking a candle, went to bed, hoping to obtain a good night's rest.

It was a glorious morning when we left Aunay, and Étienne, an old retainer on the estate, came to the gate to wish us God-speed.

"Give my respects to your mistress and to Mademoiselle de Brione," I said as we rode away.

The air was fresh and cool; dew-drops gemmed the earth's green carpet, and hung like pendants of brilliants from the leaves of the trees; hundreds of songsters poured forth delicious hymns of praise to the opening day; the rising sun tinted the distant peaks with purple and gold; the whole earth seemed like fairy-land.

Shaking his handsome mane, my horse, of his own accord, broke into a canter, while I, almost involuntarily, trolled forth a well-known hunting song.

Pillot, who rode at my side, was a merry companion, full of quips, and jests, and odd conceits, which lightened the tedium of the journey. The fellow was undoubtedly a rogue of the first water, but he possessed many amiable traits, and had a fine sense of humour.

Not being in a particular hurry, and still feeling the effects of my recent illness, I resolved to stay for the night at Aviers, a village about thirty miles from Aunay. The inn was dirty, the accommodation meagre, and the landlord a surly boor, who behaved as if we had done him a grievous injury by stopping at his house. After providing a feed for the horses, his resources appeared to be exhausted, and, but for Pillot, I should doubtless have gone to bed without supper. He, however, had a keen appetite, and meant to satisfy it.

"Stay here, monsieur," said he, cheerfully; "if there is anything eatable in the place we will soon have it on the table. *Peste!* things are coming to a fine pass when a gentleman cannot be served with food at an inn!"

He skipped away, and I heard him storming at our host in a high-pitched voice, threatening all manner of penalties unless supper was immediately forthcoming. Precisely what arguments he used I cannot say, but presently he returned in triumph with the surly innkeeper, carrying bread, butter, cheese, poached eggs, and a bottle of wine.

"There is a fowl cooking on the spit," said he, "but I thought that, meanwhile, monsieur would not object to begin with this."

He was right, I made no objections whatever, and, having finished the first course, was equally ready to proceed with the second. The fowl was done to a turn, and when at length the innkeeper came to clear away, he looked aghast at the wreck of his provisions.

"An excellent supper, Pillot!" I exclaimed contentedly. "I have no doubt that my cousin finds your services valuable."

"We all have our gifts," he replied laughing, "and the wise folk are those who know how to make use of them. But a word in your ear, monsieur. To-night it will be as well to sleep lightly. These villagers are hangdog looking fellows, and if they fancy we are worth plundering, why——" and he finished with a most comical shrug of the shoulders.

"It is a queer world, Pillot," I remarked. "Here at Aviers you do your best to keep me from harm; in Paris most likely you will be doing all in your power to kill me."

"Only in the way of business, monsieur, and for the good of the Cause!"

"What do you call the Cause?"

"The filling of my pocket, monsieur."

He was a thorough rascal, but not a hypocrite, and so far was a better man than those he served. He marched to battle under the banner of Pillot, and gathered in the spoils openly. He had a stout heart, too, and did not whine when the luck was against him, as he had shown at La Boule d'Or. Altogether, I could not help feeling a sort of liking for the rogue.

The chamber to which the innkeeper showed me after supper was small, dark, and low in the

ceiling, but, as I have mentioned, the inn itself was a poor place. I looked to the fastenings of the door; they were very slight, and completely useless as a protection.

"Take no notice, monsieur," whispered Pillot, rapidly. "The boor has given me a sleeping place downstairs, but presently I shall return here quietly, and then—ah well, we shall see."

Then he wished me good-night loudly, and followed the landlord downstairs, while I, blowing out the light, lay fully dressed on the bed, and with my weapons close at hand. In spite of Pillot's warning I fell asleep, but it was still dark when I wakened with a curious feeling that something was happening. Being unable to see, I lay still and listened intently.

Creak! Creak! The sound was very low, but I recognised that some one was opening the door from the outside. Another creak, and then silence. Very quietly I reached for my sword and prepared to spring from the bed. Presently, as if satisfied that the sound had not disturbed me, my uninvited guest pushed the door ajar and slipped into the room. I could not perceive him, yet I knew he was creeping closer to my side.

"*Pouf!*" I thought to myself, "there will be an unwelcome surprise for you in a moment, my friend."

Suddenly the silence was broken by a loud and terrified cry, followed by a harsh laugh. Then there was a rush of feet towards the door, and, jumping to the ground, I groped for the tinder-box and procured a light. Running to the landing and holding up the candle, I was just in time to behold a most comical sight. One of the villagers was running down the stairs as fast as his legs would carry him, and screaming with fright, while Pillot clung firmly to his back.

"Help! help!" shouted the fellow; "help! the Evil One has got me," and very soon every one in the house was running to discover the cause of the tumult. At the bottom of the stairs the two passed from sight, but the screams continued, and presently we heard a smash as if a door had been burst open.

"What is it?" cried one of the trembling servants.

"It was Pierre Angin who called," said another, "I would swear to his voice."

The innkeeper turned to me appealingly, and willing to give them a further fright I said, "It is simple enough. This fellow came to rob, perhaps to kill me. I heard him in my room. For the rest I do not think he will turn thief again in a hurry."

In the midst of the hubbub, Pillot came towards us, rubbing his eyes sleepily, and asking in a cross voice what the mischief was, and why a man could not be allowed to sleep without all that clatter. So well did he act that, but for my glimpse of him on the stairs, I should not have guessed he was the author of the trick.

"If monsieur will lend me the candle," said he, "we will make a search," and he gravely led the way downstairs.

"This is the way," cried the innkeeper, "see here!" and, perspiring with excitement, he pointed to the door which led into the stable yard. In his desperate efforts to escape, the fellow had burst it open at a blow.

No one in the inn went to sleep again that night. Pillot returned to my room, and told with evident enjoyment all about his trick. He was lying in wait when the man first entered, and, as the fellow crouched to the ground, had sprung lightly on his back.

"He thought the Evil One had him, monsieur, to a certainty, and yelled loud enough to waken the dead. I do believe that till his dying day Pierre Angin will be an honest man!"

As soon as it was light the innkeeper, still looking white and scared, prepared some breakfast, and afterwards ordered our animals to be brought to the door. From the joyful way he pocketed the coin I gave him, it was evident he had not counted on payment, which perhaps explained the surliness of his manners. Might was right in those dark days of the Fronde, and the folk of the strong hand cared little for justice. Pillot, I am sure, thought me crazy, to pay this simple boor in money, when a cut with a whip would, in his opinion, have done just as well.

The weather remained beautifully fine, and, until near the capital, our ride was very pleasant. During the last part of the journey, however, my cheerfulness was dashed by the universal signs of desolation and decay. The ground lay bare and unfilled, the fat beeves and sturdy oxen had vanished, to be replaced here and there by a lean scraggy beast or two, all skin and bone; the yards were destitute of ricks, the hovels were deserted or inhabited by diseased and half-starved scarecrows; erstwhile honest villagers, rendered desperate by hunger, prowled in the woods to pounce on any unwary traveller whom chance should deliver into their hands.

Pillot saw to his pistols and I loosened my sword, since it was probable we should have occasion for both. One ragged, unkempt fellow did take a shot at us from behind a tree, but, missing his aim, he dashed into the thick wood and was lost to sight.

"*Parbleu!* these peasants need not talk of the wickedness of Paris!" exclaimed my companion, "when a peaceful citizen cannot travel in safety on the king's highway."

"Starving men rarely distinguish between right and wrong, and these people have been turned into wild beasts. Robbed and beaten as they are, I don't wonder that they rise against those who oppress them!"

"Ah!" cried Pillot with a grin, "it is all the doing of the wicked Cardinal, and these poor people perhaps recognise monsieur as his friend."

"I wonder you are not afraid to ride with me," said I, laughing at his impudence.

After this trifling adventure we rode warily, keeping a sharp look-out for any further ambush, but perhaps our display of weapons frightened the robbers, as no one interfered with us again until we arrived at the gate of St. Denis just before it closed for the night. Here I parted with Pillot, who had to make his report to my cousin Henri.

"Till our next merry meeting, monsieur!" cried he heartily. "By that time I hope we shall both be on the same side. Mazarin is gone for good, and you cannot do better than join us—we play the winning game."

The rascal bowed low and rode off, while I turned towards the city.

CHAPTER XI.

A Scheme that Went Amiss

Paris seemed much as usual. The streets were filled with noisy bands of turbulent people, but there were fewer cries of "Down with Mazarin!" the mob contenting itself with cheering for Condé and De Retz, though several times I heard the Prince's name uttered with every sign of anger and disapproval.

Fortunately my former rooms were still vacant, so, having stabled my horse at the inn two doors below, I took possession, and soon had the satisfaction of sitting down to an ample supper.

"Monsieur has been long away," remarked the landlord on coming to remove the things.

"I have been in the country for the benefit of my health," I replied carelessly. "Affairs have changed since I was here last."

"Ah, yes! The Cardinal has fled, and Condé will be master now. The stupid Fronde is done with, monsieur, and we are all brothers together."

"And the Queen?" I asked curiously, "does she approve of all these changes?"

"She is delighted, monsieur. There will be no rough places or crooked paths for her any more; the prince is so powerful that no one dares to attack her," and the honest fellow departed, smiling with pleasure at the prospect of peace.

Early the next morning I walked across to the Palais Royal, wondering what was best to be done, when, to my lively joy, I found that Belloc still held a command there. I gave my name to the officer on duty, and was immediately admitted to the old soldier's quarters. He was sitting in his room, looking harassed and worn, which rather surprised me, because as a rule nothing troubled him. He greeted me kindly, and as we sat chatting I thought he was trying to make up his mind on some knotty point.

"Were you in the city last night?" he asked presently.

"Yes! The people are wild with delight at the idea of seeing Condé."

Casting an anxious glance round the room, he said in a low voice, "Come nearer, Albert, I am going to reveal a secret. First of all, the Prince is still in prison, and if all goes well this evening he will stay there. You are a brave lad, and honest, and I think you can help me."

"I will do my best," said I, flushing with pleasure at his praise.

"The adventure is dangerous, and it worries me, not for myself but for others. If it succeeds, the Cardinal will be stronger than ever; if it fails——" and he finished with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You may count on me."

"Yes, I am sure of it. Well, this is what we intend to do. At present the Queen has few friends in Paris, but the country will fight for the King. Now, the plan is to smuggle them out of the city, when they will join the Cardinal, and take up arms for the freedom of the throne. Without Condé, the rest will be able to accomplish nothing."

"A good plan," said I, "and the sooner it is carried out the better."

"If all goes well, to-morrow morning will find us far away from Paris. Everything is ready, but I cannot trust the Queen's coachman. He is an honest fellow enough, but timid, and likely to lose his head at the first sign of danger. Do you think you can drive the coach safely?"

"Let me choose my horses!"

"You can have the pick of the royal stables. But, mind you, Albert, this is no child's play. If the mob gets wind of the affair there will be a terrible struggle. I shall not think the worse of you if you decide to leave the business alone."

"I will undertake it, old friend, but you must supply me with a coachman's dress."

"That can be obtained easily; there are plenty for sale in the city, and I will send a trusty fellow to buy one which will fit you."

He left the room, hinting it would be better that I should not show myself, and leaving me in a high state of excitement to ponder over the coming venture. It was a risky one, but I was young and hot-headed, and did not fully realise the danger.

The old soldier returned about noon, bringing my fresh clothes with him, and I put them on. Then he browned my face and hands with some colouring matter, and I was transformed into a very fair specimen of a coachman.

"*Parbleu!*" cried he, rubbing his hands, "you will do famously. Now I will take you to the stables; choose your horses; have them ready, and bring them round to Mazarin's private entrance at six o'clock precisely. You have your pistols? Right. I don't know about your sword, but perhaps it will be useful. I will have it placed on the seat of the coach. First of all, though, you must have something to eat, and I will serve you myself; it is doubtful which of the servants can be trusted."

During the meal he repeated his instructions, and it was plain that the terrible responsibility had made him extremely anxious.

"Mind," said he, as we rose at length to leave the room, "from this moment your life is no longer your own. You must sacrifice it, if need be, for the Queen."

"I am willing to do that, monsieur, though I hope there will be no occasion."

Passing along the corridor, and descending a flight of steps, we reached a part of the palace which I had not visited before, and were met by M. Corveau, who was really in command of the stables, though most of the fees went to a much more distinguished person.

M. Belloc introduced us to each other, and with a last whispered word of advice returned to his duties. I accompanied my new acquaintance to the stables, and after some delay chose two animals for the work in hand.

"You evidently know something of horseflesh," said Corveau, smiling, "but these are rather difficult to drive; they are too spirited."

"They will make it the more awkward for any one who happens to get in their way."

"True; but are you strong enough in the wrists to hold them?"

"I believe I can manage it."

"Well," he said, "I wish you good luck," but his tone clearly showed that he did not expect it.

However, it was useless being alarmed; so, putting a bold face on the matter, I made friends with the horses, fed and watered them myself, and spent all the afternoon with them. A quarter before six I had them put to, and, mounting the box, drove the carriage—a private one borrowed for the occasion—slowly round to the appointed place. It still wanted a few minutes to six when the bells of the city churches clanged forth in thunderous peals, and, though ignorant of the cause, I felt somewhat alarmed.

"That will be awkward for our plan," I muttered. "There is a tumult of some sort going on, and the streets will be crowded. So much the worse for us."

Five minutes passed, but no one had opened the door of the Palace; another five minutes slipped away and the animals were growing restless, when suddenly Belloc himself appeared. One glance at his face was sufficient to tell me that something had gone amiss.

"Get your weapons," he cried, "send the horses back to the stables, and come inside."

As soon as I had joined him, he fastened the door, and led the way upstairs.

"What has happened?" I asked, feeling strangely bewildered.

"Treachery," said he sternly; "we have been betrayed. Orleans has seized the gates, and the streets are filled with a shouting mob. Change your dress quickly, we shall need every sword."

"But the mob will not dare——"

"*Peste!* the mob will dare anything! De Retz has called the people to arms, and presently they will attack the Palace. Paris will swim in blood before morning."

"But De Retz will prevent the *canaille* from going too far."

"Bah! you speak like a boy! Once they are roused, De Retz can no more hold them back than he can fondle a starving tigress without being bitten. Make haste and come to me."

By the time I had cleansed the stain from my hands and face, and resumed my ordinary apparel, every one in the Palace was aware of the terrible danger. Trembling servants went about with white faces; high-born cavaliers lined the corridors leading to the royal apartments; officers silently posted their men; everything was made ready for a fierce struggle.

"No surrender!" was the cry from every fighting man. "Let us die where we stand."

Gradually the noise and tumult outside came nearer; we could hear the tramp of marching feet and the savage shouts of the populace clamouring to see the King. Choosing the post of danger, M. Belloc had stationed himself with a few trusty soldiers near the main entrance, where I joined him. The veteran was fuming with impatience; he only awaited an order from the Palace to sally forth upon the advancing multitude.

"The King!" roared the excited mob; "where is the King? show us the King!" and our leader glanced at me as if to say, "I told you the plot had been betrayed."

Meanwhile the Queen and her attendants, working hard, had restored the Palace to its usual appearance; Louis was in bed, sleeping soundly, and all traces of the intended flight had been removed.

Presently a note was brought from the Queen to Belloc, who, reading it hastily, told the messenger to inform her Majesty that her commands should be obeyed; then turning to us, he added that no one was to fire a shot until he himself gave the signal.

"Her Majesty," he explained, "hopes no blood will be shed, but that the mob having discovered its mistake will disperse quietly."

"A fig for the mob!" said a grim-looking trooper to a comrade; "let our leader give the word and we will soon clear the courtyard."

"Here comes an officer," said another; "he is wearing the Orleans colours. What does he want?"

"Bah!" cried a third trooper, who spoke with a strange accent, "this isn't the way to quell a riot. My old master lost his head through not knowing how to deal with rebels. The block for the leaders and a whipping for the others would soon teach them their manners."

The words and the accent made me look at the speaker more closely. He was a young fellow with fair hair and blue eyes like D'Arçy, but he was built more stoutly and looked stronger altogether. His name, I learned afterwards, was John Humphreys, and he was the son of an English gentleman who had lost his estates through fighting for his King, Charles I. At the moment, however, I could not think much of this young exile, my attention being engrossed by the Orleanist officer, who rode across the courtyard towards us.

"Raoul!" I exclaimed to myself, and drew back into the shadow, not caring that he should notice me. He did not seem very happy, and approached our leader as if thoroughly ashamed of his errand.

"I am Captain of the Guard to the Duke of Orleans," he explained, "and am desired by the Duke to seek an audience with her Majesty the Queen-Mother."

"Are those your followers?" asked Belloc scornfully, pointing to the howling mob outside.

Raoul returned no answer, but bit his lip deeply, while the other continued, "It is no fault of mine, M. Raoul Beauchamp, that you gain admittance to the Palace. But for the Queen's orders I would gladly send you back to your friends who make war so bravely—on a woman and a boy."

"Your speech is a trifle unjust, M. Belloc," said Raoul; "I am a soldier, and cannot question the commands of my chief. As to my own feelings—well that is another matter," and with a studied

bow he passed into the building.

Meanwhile the mob was increasing in numbers and violence every moment, and, as the soldiers had received orders not to fire, the courtyard was soon filled with excited people who howled, and danced, and shouted for the King to be produced. Two or three times I glanced anxiously at Belloc, wondering how much longer his patience would last.

"Open the doors," cried the foremost rioters; "we will enter and see for ourselves where the King is."

"The King is in bed!" cried M. Belloc angrily.

"Ah! at St. Germain!" shouted a fellow dressed like a street hawker, but whose voice I recognised, "We are betrayed!"

It was very stupid to interfere, but I could not resist the chance.

"Ha! ha! friend Peleton, then for once you are on the wrong side!" I laughed. "Generally it is you who do the betraying."

The fellow rushed at me savagely, but the young Englishman drove him back, saying, "Down, dog! Keep with your kind! You are not wanted with honest men."

"Peace!" cried M. Belloc angrily, for he saw, what I did not, that the crowd was gradually working itself into a fit of passion.

Fortunately, just then the door was opened, and Raoul, coming outside, was immediately recognised as the messenger of the Duke of Orleans.

"The King!" they yelled; "Where is he?" "Have you seen him?" "Speak or we will pull the place down."

Raoul stood on the topmost step, and raised his hand for silence. His face was pale, but he looked very handsome, and was evidently not in the least afraid.

"You have been deceived," he said. "The King is within the Palace. I have seen him; he is sound asleep. Go away quietly, or you will waken him."

They would probably have taken his advice but for Peleton, who cried lustily, "We are betrayed! How can we tell what is true, unless we see for ourselves."

"Yes, yes," shouted the mob; "that is the best way; we will see the King with our own eyes!"

Again Raoul raised his hand and spoke, telling them the King was asleep; they would not be satisfied, but demanded loudly that they should be admitted to the Palace. The situation was growing critical; we stood, as it were, upon a mine, which a spark might explode at any moment. M. Belloc's face was pale but determined; his brows were knitted; he gazed at the mob with angry scorn.

"Give us the word, sir," said the young Englishman, "and we will scatter them like chaff!"

This, I knew well, was mere reckless bravery; we were but a handful compared with the multitude, and would quickly have been lost in the human sea. Still, I liked the speaker none the less for his daring, and more than one trooper grimly growled approval.

Raoul was white now, and the perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. At first I did not understand why he should be afraid, but his hurried words to our leader made the reason plain.

"Unless something is done quickly," he exclaimed, "there will be a frightful tragedy. I will write a note to the Duke, and you shall send it by a private way. He is the only man who can induce these people to disperse."

"He, or De Retz," said Belloc with a sneer.

I had never seen the old warrior so angry. He was playing a part for which he had no liking. It was not in his nature to stand quietly by while his sovereign was insulted; his fingers strayed nervously towards the hilt of his sword; he would have leaped for joy had his Queen sent him permission to charge headlong at the rabble. But he realised, as we did, that the safety of the Royal Family depended more on tact than on brute courage, and he had just agreed to Raoul's proposal when a note was handed him from the Palace.

"*Parbleu!*" he exclaimed savagely, having mastered its contents, "this goes against the grain, but the Queen's commands must be obeyed. Here is an order, monsieur, to admit a part of the *canaille* into the Palace! Perhaps, monsieur, you will select the sturdiest of your ruffians for the honour."

Raoul did not resent the insult, though his face burned like fire, but facing the angry people he spoke to them boldly.

"Citizens," cried he, in a clear ringing voice, "I have a message for you from Her Majesty. I have told you the King is in bed and asleep, but you are not satisfied. That you may be quite sure, the Queen-Mother desires that a deputation shall visit the royal apartments. Will you be content with the report of your own friends?"

"Yes, yes," shouted the mob; "let us see the King!"

"One word more," continued Raoul sternly, when the hubbub had subsided. "I am, as you are aware, for the Duke of Orleans, and he, mind you, is loyal to the crown."

"So are we! *Vive le roi!*"

"And I will run my sword through the first man who insults the Queen-Mother by word or look."

I was proud of Raoul at that moment, and Belloc gripped his hand, saying heartily, "Forgive my rough words, Beauchamp; you are made of the right stuff after all!"

Directly the door was opened the mob pressed forward, and I called mockingly to Peleton to come inside the Palace, but that worthy, having finished his work, slunk away.

To relieve the pressure other doors were opened, and soon we had a motley throng of carters, hawkers, and shopkeepers, waiting to be led to the King's room. At a sign from Belloc I accompanied them, and for the first time Raoul perceived me. He dared not speak just then, but his face showed how completely he detested his errand.

After a short delay the procession was marshalled into something like order, and I must say, in justice to our uninvited visitors, that, now their point was gained, no one could grumble with their behaviour. They walked softly, and spoke in whispers, and as we approached the royal apartments every man bared his head. The soldiers were out of sight, and the Queen-Mother was attended only by the ladies of her household. The Lady Anne's face betrayed no sign of fear. From her manner one would have thought she was receiving a deputation from the crowned heads of Europe.

The King, as Raoul had declared, was in bed, and sleeping so soundly that the tumult and confusion failed to awaken him. Very softly the men stole past on tip-toe, and, as they gazed at the handsome boy, more than one grimy unkempt fellow murmured, "God bless him!"

All danger was at an end, the raging tigers who had stormed in the courtyard were changed into lambs, and the only cry to reach the soldiers on guard at the gates was, "*Vive le roi!*" As soon as the last man had departed, the doors of the Palace were securely fastened, and then M. Belloc despatched me by a private way to discover what was happening in the city. In order to avoid undue attention I threw a plain cloak over my gaudy apparel, but there was no danger. A few hired agitators endeavoured to stir up the tumult afresh, but the men who had beheld the sleeping King would not give them hearing.

"The Duke has been deceived," shouted one burly ruffian. "I have been to the Palace and seen the King asleep. The Queen does not wish to leave Paris, I tell you!"

In this, of course, he was wrong, but his words had effect, and the mob at that point breaking up dispersed to their homes. For two hours I roamed about, and then, finding the streets rapidly clearing, returned to the Palais Royal with the assurance that, for the time at least, De Retz and his friends had failed.

"Had I my way," exclaimed Belloc wrathfully, "both De Retz and Orleans should find lodgings in the Bastille. However, we have done our best, and must wait events. This night's work means that Condé must be set at liberty. A plague on it!"

"Then we may bid a long adieu to the Cardinal!"

"Don't be so sure of that, my boy. Mazarin may have a fall or two, but he generally wins at the finish. And now, go to my room and rest; we will have a further talk in the morning."

CHAPTER XII.

I have a Narrow Escape.

At breakfast, M. Belloc, who had not retired during the night, informed me that he had already received the Queen's commands, and was on the point of setting out for Havre, where the Cardinal was expected to be found.

"At present," he continued, "we must play a waiting game. Our time will come when the new allies begin quarrelling, and that will not be long."

"Do I go with you?" I asked.

"No. It is possible you may be of some use to us in Paris, and I have told Le Tellier where to find you. I have also given your name to the Queen, and informed her she may rely on your services. It may be that I shall return shortly; if so, you will hear from me. Meanwhile, keep eyes and ears well open, and be ready to obey any order from Le Tellier or the Queen."

As soon as my friend had started—and he was in a desperate hurry—I returned to my rooms, feeling rather lonely and disappointed. On the table was a brief note from Raoul, announcing that he had gone to Havre, and could not tell when he would be in Paris again.

"*Peste!*" I exclaimed moodily, "one might as well be at Vançey as here. How shall I pass the time? It seems that, after all, I have brought my produce to a bad market."

I had stayed at home several days doing nothing, when one evening my landlord, bustling into the room, exclaimed, "Is it possible monsieur does not know that the city is *en fête* in honour of the prince's arrival? All the world has gone to witness the sights, and the prince is expected in an hour's time!"

I had no desire to swell the welcome to Condé, but to sit moping alone was dreary work; so, buckling on my sword, I sallied out. Always at one extreme or the other, the Parisians had prepared a magnificent reception for their latest favourite. Lanterns were hung from the windows of the houses, bonfires blazed, bands of nobles in gorgeous dresses lined the streets, splendid carriages with richly-caparisoned horses were drawn up, ready to take part in the procession, while the people were cheering in their thousands for Condé.

"*Ma foi!*" exclaimed a strong voice, which sounded somewhat familiar, "one would imagine this Condé to be a king!" and looking round, I recognised the Englishman who belonged to the Queen's Guards.

"Be careful," said I, warningly. "It is unwise to abuse Condé here."

"For to-day!" replied he, laughing. "To-morrow it may be different. Pardon me, monsieur, but I do not understand your people. They are too much like quicksilver; one is never sure where to catch them. Just now they welcome Condé as a hero, but who can say what they will do in a week?"

"Monsieur makes the mistake of most strangers; he judges the country by Paris, which is wrong," I remarked.

"Perhaps so. Paris is almost the only place with which I am acquainted. But are you, too, waiting to cheer Condé? If not, let us slip away from the crowd; the noise is becoming a nuisance."

He was such a pleasant fellow that I gladly joined him, and we strolled back together to the Palais Royal. His name, as I have mentioned, was John Humphreys, and, although still a young man, he had already been through numerous adventures. In the great English Civil War he had fought at his father's side for King Charles. Then, being left alone and penniless by the death of his father in the Low Countries, he had journeyed to Paris and taken service in the Queen's Guards. There were numerous English exiles in Paris at that time, but most of them, I think, were in the pay of Condé.

Raoul had not returned, so that I was glad of the Englishman's company, and, indeed, we very soon became good friends. He was never tired of talking about his country and of his hope one day to live there again. Sometimes I accompanied him to his quarters at the Palais Royal, where he introduced me to a few of his comrades, but more often we strolled about the city.

For once in a while Paris was actually quiet. The people went peacefully to their daily work; the lowest classes retired to their dens, and one could take a morning walk without meeting a howling mob. Every one repeated the same tale. Mazarin would never return; Condé was master, and the stupid Fronde was at an end.

Madame Coutance had returned to Paris with her niece, and occasionally I spent an hour at her house, where she treated me with much kindness; only she would insist that I was a silly fellow not to abandon a lost cause.

For a time it really seemed that Condé's triumph was assured, but soon I began to hear whispers that all was not right in the Palais Royal. Bits of gossip picked up by the Englishman, and a word or two from Le Tellier, made me imagine that Condé's position was less safe than he imagined.

Sitting alone one evening by the open window of my room, I noticed, approaching the house, a handsomely-dressed gallant, holding in his hand a naked sword on which were some fresh blood-stains. He, glanced up at me, smiling, and I, recognising Raoul, ran hastily to meet him.

"Why, it is as dangerous to visit you as a deposed favourite!" he cried merrily.

"You come in such gorgeous plumage. Many a man in the Rue des Catonnes would cheerfully risk his life for the value of your gold braid. But," glancing at the blood on his sword, "you have discovered that!"

"Yes, there is a poor wretch farther down nursing his arm and grumbling frightfully at his own clumsiness; but I threw him a pistole or two to buy some ointment. So you have not followed the Cardinal?"

"No! I am waiting here till his return," and we went upstairs together, Raoul laughing heartily at what he called my impudence.

He did not refer to our last meeting at the Palais Royal, but chatted gaily about his sudden visit to Havre, though, of course, without revealing to me the secrets of his party.

"Well," I remarked presently, "now that the wretched squabble is over, what have you gained by it?"

"Over?" he cried in astonishment; "come to the Pont Neuf and see for yourself what is going on. The cards have been shuffled again, and we are playing the game with different partners. Condé has gone too far, and Dame Anne will have none of him. He claims every office in the State for his friends, and three-fourths of the country for himself. Unless he is put down, as Mazarin says, there will be nothing left but to carry him to Rheims."

"Then you have broken with the prince?"

"Our party holds the scales at present; neither side can do anything without us."

"What of De Retz?"

"That is the most comical part of all; he is hand in glove with the Queen, and has become Condé's bitterest enemy. At least that was the situation this morning. To-morrow perhaps will furnish a fresh move."

"One has to blush for being a Frenchman! I shall go to Marshal Turenne; he is the only honest man in the country."

"Another broken reed, my friend! If rumour speaks truly, he has made a bargain with Condé, and will support him even in open rebellion. By the way, do not wander about the city too much at night."

"Why?" I asked, looking at him in surprise.

"Because you have made two bitter enemies—Maubranne and Peleton. They have both joined De Retz, and Peleton will work you all the mischief he can. He is a dangerous man."

"A fig for Peleton! He is a coward."

"A coward can often strike a sure blow in the dark."

We were in the streets by this time, and, passing with difficulty through the crowds of people, I was strongly reminded of the evening when I accompanied the now exiled minister to the house of the astrologer.

The riff-raff of the city were out in large numbers; the hawkers were crying their literary wares; the Black Mantles had gathered in knots to guard their property; while the young bloods swaggered along, laughing and joking, but toying with their swords as if longing for a chance to use them. On the previous occasion the rabble had roared themselves hoarse with cries against Mazarin and the Queen-Mother; now they shouted with equal vigour against Condé and his friends.

"The Abbé is still alive," remarked Raoul, as we pushed a way through the crowd.

"Is this his doing?"

"Every bit of it, and your cousin Henri makes an able lieutenant. De Retz is a dangerous enemy; all the blackguards in the city are under his thumb. You will find that he will drive the prince out of Paris before he has finished."

"What are they doing to that fellow yonder? Why, it is Joli, and they are making him cry 'Down with Condê!'"

Raoul burst out laughing. "Joli is Condé's henchman!" he exclaimed, "and a week ago he had the mob at his call. To-morrow as likely as not the idiots will be bawling for Mazarin."

"The nobles have set them a good example. There goes Joli. I did not think he could run so fast. But these fellows are becoming too daring. See, they have stopped a carriage at the corner

of the street, and are threatening the occupants."

"More of Condé's friends," said Raoul lightly. "Fortunately, Joli has put the crowd in good humour, and there will be no mischief done unless those inside are obstinate."

"Listen. There is one woman not easily frightened!" and above the turmoil caused by the *canaille* rose a defiant "*Vive le Prince!*"

"Imbecile!" cried Raoul angrily, "they will tear her in pieces!"

"She has plenty of pluck, whoever she is!" I replied.

The next instant we had drawn our swords; for the woman in the carriage who had so proudly defied the ruffians of Paris was Madame Coutance, and by her side, pale yet undismayed, sat Marie.

The elder lady, marvellously handsome in her excitement, stood up in full view of the crowd. Her cheeks were flushed; her large black eyes flashed with surprising brilliancy; her lips were firm and compressed; and she gazed at the mob in scornful disdain. At first the people laughed good-naturedly, telling her that if she would cry "Down with Condé!" they would let her carriage pass. Then some of the fiercer ones pressing closer, used threats, but Madame Coutance, either reckless from excitement or not understanding the danger, only smiled.

Raoul and I had reached the fringe of the now angry crowd, when, turning round at a touch on my shoulder, I perceived my English friend.

"What is it?" he asked. "Another revolution?"

"The people are trying to force a woman to cry 'Down with Condé.'"

"There's her answer," said he, as in a clear ringing voice Madame Coutance cried aloud, "Pah! You are not good enough for Condé to wipe his boots on!"

There was no disguising the bitterness of the insult. The aristocrat flung it at them, flung it fight in their faces, and laughed as she saw it strike home. A howl of rage greeted the taunt, and, listening to the wild, fierce yell—so different from the noisy bravado of a few minutes before, I shuddered; there was something so stern and purposeful about it.

For fully a minute each man stood in his place, nursing the insult he had received; then, as if by one common impulse, the whole body sprang at the carriage. The uproar waxed furious; the narrow street became a pandemonium; in their savage eagerness the people struggled and fought without order or method.

The occupants of the houses on both sides, joining in the fray, showered missiles on the excited mob; the horses, maddened by the din, kicked and plunged; men shouted and women screamed; while Marie's aunt stood laughing defiantly at the monster her words had conjured up. She had thrown one arm around her niece as if to protect her, and confronted the mob with flashing eyes and scornful brow.

At the first sign of danger we had drawn our swords; now, flinging ourselves headlong into the press, we struck out fiercely to right and left, trying to force a passage to the carriage. Raoul cut and thrust in gallant style, and all the time he shouted with the full power of his lungs, "Orleans! Orleans! To me, friends of Orleans." I, taking my cue, yelled for Condé; the Englishman shouted, "Way for the Queen's Guards," while the mob endeavoured to drown our appeals by the ugly menace of "Death to the Nobles!"

There was scant leisure in which to look at the ladies, but Madame Coutance did not once alter her position, nor try to hide the sneering smile on her face.

Meanwhile our lusty shouts had brought assistance. Several Black Mantles, fearful lest the riot should spread, fought with us; a couple of gentlemen, responding to the cry of "Condé!" had dashed in behind me, and presently from the street corner came a shout of "Beauchamp! Beauchamp!"

"Bravo, D'Arçy!" cried Raoul in answer, and we continued the fight with greater zest. After all, the nobles of France were not quite dead to honour; their lives were still at the service of their friends.

Taking the shortest cut through the crowd, John Humphreys and I had reached the carriage door, and now stood with our backs to it, striving desperately to keep the ruffians off; Raoul, aided by several Black Mantles, was working round to the other side.

At first we fought with a certain amount of skill and method, only endeavouring to parry our opponents' strokes, but presently the struggle became grim and deadly. Then the fading daylight rapidly gave place to darkness, which was hardly lessened by the lanterns swung from the windows or by the fitful glow of the glaring pitch in the *falot* at the corner of the street. The figures of the combatants, now momentarily lost in the black shadows, again springing forward into full relief, were horribly grotesque.

Like ourselves, the people of the gutters were growing desperate, holding their own lives of no account, if only they could seize their prey. Yelling and screaming, they struck out wildly with the oddest of odd weapons, and sprang at us, gnashing their teeth like wild beasts.

[Transcriber's note: illustration missing from book]

Of the Black Mantles who supported us, two went down quickly and were trampled on; Raoul was bleeding in the face, and I had received a nasty cut across the head; but Armand d'Arçy and his friends were breaking through the crowd, while the cries of "Orleans!" and "Condé" redoubled.

Suddenly in the midst of it, my sword snapped against a pike-head, and in another instant I should have been killed but for Madame Coutance, who, with the heavy end of the coachman's whip, struck my assailant across the forehead, felling him like a log.

Taken by surprise, I turned to glance at my deliverer, when a brawny fellow with fiery red hair, whose weapon had been wrenched from him in the fray, leaped at my throat. By the flame of a lackey's torch I saw he was as ugly a rascal as one would find in Paris. He had a huge mouth, with yellow, wolf-like teeth; his face was scarred in a dozen places; the bridge of his nose had at one time been broken, while the veins of his neck stood out like cords, A pair of tattered breeches and the remnant of a shirt constituted his fighting costume.

Missing my neck, he caught me round the body just under the arm-pits, but leaving my arms free. For a second or two I was held as in a vice; I thought my ribs would crack under the pressure, and struggled wildly for breath. The main fight went on around us unheeded, as we swayed to and fro, now lurching against the broken carriage, now pushed under the heels of the kicking horses, or stumbling beneath the weapons of the other combatants.

I could no longer distinguish anything clearly, and the shouting sounded in my ears like the thunderous roaring of the ocean. Blood was running from my nostrils; the pain in my chest might have been caused by red-hot knives; it was almost impossible to breathe. The fellow was slowly crushing me, and I was helpless. I should have cried aloud in agony, but could make only a faint gurgling noise. Closer and closer pressed the iron grip; my eyes burned like fire, while my breath came in short, stifling gasps. Still I stood firmly on the ground with my feet wide apart, and, strong as my assailant was, he had not beaten me completely.

If only I could get a breath of air into my lungs! It was my one chance and the last; but the brawny ruffian, guessing how nearly gone I was, hugged me ever the more tightly, till it seemed that the unequal strife could not last another second. Whether the final result was brought about by my last desperate effort, or was due to chance, I could not tell, but suddenly both of us, locked as we were in each other's arms, fell. I was underneath, but, strangely enough, the pressure relaxed, and my assailant uttered a deep groan.

Presently the heavy weight lying across my body was removed; I began to breathe, and to wonder what had happened. Very slowly I opened my eyes and gazed in astonishment at the altered scene.

The street was in possession of the Queen's Guards, at whose approach the rioters, acting on instructions from their leaders, had fled, carrying their wounded comrades with them. In the middle of the roadway stood a group of young gallants—all of whom had borne a part in the fray, and several Black Mantles, attending to a slightly injured man! Raoul and Armand d'Arçy were wiping the blood from my face, while the Englishman was forcing some liquid between my teeth.

"How do you feel?" he asked. "Can you stand?"

"Yes, there is nothing much wrong; only I have had a bear's hug, which was by no means pleasant. What has become of my opponent?"

"His friends carried him off. He was insensible; one of the frightened horses kicked him. He was a savage customer."

"You had a narrow escape, my boy," said Raoul, smiling cheerfully; "you were black in the face when we removed the fellow. Now, lean on me, you must pay your respects to the ladies."

"Salute the hero!" laughed D'Arçy. "Bring flowers and wreathe a garland for his brow. Let the conqueror be crowned on the tented field."

"Be still, D'Arçy," said Raoul, "your tongue runs like a woman's," and he conducted me to Marie and her aunt, who, between them, made a pretty speech in my honour. They wished me to enter the carriage, which, though badly damaged, remained fit for use; but to this I would not agree, preferring to walk beside it.

While the coachman put his harness straight, and quietened his frightened horses, the ladies spoke a few kind words to the wounded Black Mantle who had fought for them so bravely. Fortunately he had not been seriously hurt, and was able, with the assistance of his friends, to walk home.

Suddenly young D'Arçy, who could never remain long in a serious humour, requested us to wait a few minutes, and without staying for answer darted off to his friends, who immediately dispersed.

"What mischief is the young madcap bent on now?" I asked, wonderingly.

"Armand has a brilliant idea," Raoul replied, laughing, "be patient and you will see."

Now that the excitement had cooled, I looked round for the Englishman, but he had vanished, for which, when D'Arçy's hare-brained scheme became plain, I was not altogether sorry.

CHAPTER XIII.

I again Encounter Maubranne.

The Queen's Guards had disappeared; the coachman was mounting to his seat when Armand and his friends returned, flourishing lighted torches, and singing a ridiculous song about the Abbé de Retz.

"A torchlight procession in honour of the bravery of the ladies!" exclaimed D'Arçy with a merry laugh. "Form your ranks, gentlemen; we will teach the impudent little Abbé to keep his place!"

Holding torches in their left hands and naked swords in their right, the youthful gallants fell in; some in front, others to the rear of the carriage, while Raoul and I, unable to oppose this ludicrous whim, walked on either side. Marie, who did not favour D'Arçy's pleasantry, sat so far back that her face could not be observed, but her aunt entered into the fun, and laughed merrily when the torchbearers, catching some luckless wight, forced him to bow humbly before the carriage and to cry, "*Vivent les Dames!*"

The glare of the torches, the trampling of feet, the songs and laughter of the escort, brought the people out in crowds, which compelled us to proceed at a slow pace. Here and there we heard a growl of "Down with Condé!" but for the most part the worthy citizens enjoyed the spectacle and cheered heartily.

In the Rue Michel we were brought to a halt, and it appeared as if a second and more serious blood-letting would occur. The narrow street was already crowded, and a carriage, preceded by half-a-dozen lackeys bearing torches, came towards us. Casting a furtive glance at Raoul, I discovered him looking anxiously at me; it was obvious to us both that one party must turn back, but, unfortunately for any peaceful intentions we might have had, young D'Arçy who led the van, showed no sign of yielding.

"Make room there!" he shouted imperiously, as if he were Condé himself, and the people, cowed by our display of strength, parted to right and left, leaving a clear passage.

This gave us a clearer view of the other carriage, and I noticed with dismay that it must belong to some important personage. Behind rode a number of cavaliers richly dressed, and what was more to the purpose, well armed. Suddenly a mocking cry from Armand informed us who it was that paraded the streets thus numerously attended.

"Bring your torches nearer, gentlemen, that we may observe the red hat of our little friend the better!" he exclaimed.

A burst of mocking laughter greeted this speech, as every one knew how De Retz had been tricked by Mazarin, and how furious he was at having failed to obtain a Cardinal's hat. Even the bystanders, most of whom were the Abbé's friends, joined in the laugh, for your true Parisian loves nothing so much as ridicule.

"Poor little man," cried one of the gallants, with assumed sympathy, "it is difficult for him to hit on the exact shade to suit his beauty best!"

Now, as De Retz was one of the ugliest men in France, this pleasantry was not likely to be well received, and I ran to the front with the idea of preserving peace. At the same time the Abbé, followed by my cousin, left the carriage, and the cavaliers pressed up from behind. Instead of retreating, Armand stood his ground firmly, and continued waving his lighted torch in the face of the Abbé, crying, "Make way for His Eminence! The Cardinal wishes to visit the ladies his mob tried to murder!"

"Eh? What's that? Ladies? Murder? What do you mean?" cried the Abbé, affecting not to notice the ridicule.

"Permit me to give your gentlemen the word," interposed Henri, "and these popinjays shall soon be cleared from your path."

"The popinjays will take some time to clear!" remarked Armand laughing. "I am not acquainted with any law which gives a private citizen, even though he be a prospective cardinal, sole right to the streets of Paris."

Now my cousin Henri was not noted for his lamb-like temper, so, without waiting for the Abbé's commands, he drew his sword and rushed at D'Arçy, crying, "On guard!"

Another instant and the Rue Michel would have become the scene of fierce combat, but, unseen by us, a stranger quietly pushed his way through the crowd, and placed himself without the least hesitation between the combatants. I gazed at him with interest. He was a tall, finely-built man, with a long, flowing beard, and the most resolute face I had yet beheld in Paris. His eyes were bright, shrewd, and piercing, his chin was square and firm, every line of his features betokened power and the habit of command. Looking at him one was tempted to exclaim, "Here at least is a man!"

He wore the long robe of a councillor, and carried no weapon, but he would have been a daring man who attacked him. The danger in which he stood troubled him not at all; he did not seem even to be aware of it.

"Put up your swords, gentlemen," he said quietly, and as if quite sure that no one would question his right to command. Then, turning to De Retz he added in the same cool tones, "Monsieur l'Abbé, I am surprised you have not sufficient influence to prevent a breach of the peace! It ill becomes a dignitary of the Church to be taking part in a street brawl."

I can hardly imagine that De Retz was awed by the speaker—perhaps he had private reasons for avoiding a quarrel with this strong, purposeful man: at least he showed no offence at the rebuke, and not only requested Henri to sheathe his sword, but actually offered a half apology for the quarrel, which really was none of his seeking.

"One must always yield to the ladies!" he exclaimed gallantly, and, with a courteous bow to the stranger, ordered his coach to be turned back.

"Who is he?" I asked Raoul, as the peacemaker, after scolding D'Arçy for his rudeness, and bidding him be less hasty in future, withdrew.

"Matthew Mole, the first President, and the only honest public man in France," replied Raoul bitterly, as he resumed his place in the procession.

The torch-bearers were not yet weary of their mischief, but the encounter with De Retz rendered them less demonstrative, and the remainder of the journey passed without incident. On arriving at the Rue Crillon, in order to keep up the character of the play, Armand marshalled his comrades in two lines, forming a kind of triumphal passage for Marie and her aunt.

As soon as the ladies entered their house the escort dispersed, some going one way, some another, Raoul and I walked away together, and D'Arçy, still bubbling over with fun, accompanied us.

"A nice evening's amusement," laughed the young scamp; "but what was it all about? *Ma foi*, Beauchamp, I shall have to look after you more carefully in the future, or you will be getting into further scrapes!"

"Take care yourself," I suggested, "or De Retz will lay you by the heels. He won't be in a hurry to forgive this night's work."

"Oh! the Abbé is a man of sense; he will laugh at the joke to-morrow, and accept his defeat gracefully. What a firebrand your cousin is! Did you notice his eyes flash? I thought he meant to make mincemeat of me! It is a pity you are always against him; he will take quite a dislike to you."

"Peleton and Maubranne are more to be feared than Henri," said Raoul. "Each of them has several scores to settle with our friend."

"And with you and D'Arçy!"

"Yes, but we possess powerful patrons; you have none. If Peleton stabbed either of us in the back he would have to answer to the Duke of Orleans, but who is there to champion your quarrel? Come with us to the Luxembourg, and let us introduce you to the Duke. There is no dishonour in taking fresh service now that Mazarin has fled."

"Still I intend to stand by the Cardinal!"

"Bravo!" cried Armand; "never desert your colours! I wish, though, that you belonged to our side."

"You will come over to us yet," I said. "A week ago you were hand in glove with De Retz; now

you are Condé's friends. Next week——"

"That is too far off to consider," laughed Armand. "Next week? Why there are several days before that time arrives! Your mind flies too fast, my boy. I have yet to hear what led to such a hubbub this evening!"

"A mere trifle," remarked Raoul; "Madame Coutance behaved foolishly. The Abbé's mob ordered her to cry 'Down with Condé!' and she told them they weren't fit to be his doormat."

"She has plenty of pluck!"

"It is a pity she hasn't a little more common-sense. To-night she might have set all Paris by the ears through her want of thought. Mazarin was right in declaring she is like a child playing with fire."

"By the way," asked Raoul, "who was the soldier fighting for us? By his uniform he should be one of the Queen's Guards."

"He does belong to them. He is an Englishman named Humphreys, and a right good fellow."

"A fine swordsman! It was wonderful how he cleared a space; the people were afraid to be anywhere near him."

"I must introduce him at the first opportunity. You are sure to like him."

"Not as an opponent," laughed Raoul; "and he doesn't seem likely to be anything else at present. Well, we turn off here; I shall see you at the end of the week."

"Meanwhile keep your eyes open!" D'Arçy advised, as they proceeded towards the Luxembourg, while I, crossing the Pont Neuf, turned down by the Quai.

I had at the time a great deal to think of. Being young and strong, I cared little for the threatened danger, but my stock of money was running low, and I foresaw that, unless something unexpected happened, I should be stranded before long for want of funds.

Thus far, I thought bitterly, my search for fortune had not met with much success. Twice I had been within an ace of death, and my body still bore the marks of several wounds. Mazarin, to whose service I was pledged, had been banished, and I could find another patron only among his enemies. Completely wrapped up in these thoughts, I wandered along the dirty quay, and turning mechanically in the proper direction, reached the Rue des Catonnes.

The next day I increased my stock of ready money by the sale of my horse, which enabled me to carry on again for a time, and I hoped that before the supply was exhausted a fresh turn of fortune's wheel would relieve my difficulties. Raoul, of course, would have lent me his purse freely, but that I did not wish.

During the evening my English friend came across from the Palais Royal for a chat about the adventure of the previous night. Like Raoul, he blamed Madame Coutance for her stupid behaviour, speaking his mind freely, and not stopping to choose his words.

"Did you return with your comrades?" I asked.

"Yes, and a lucky thing too, or I should have got into worse trouble. As it was, our captain reproved me severely for engaging in a street brawl. Upon my word I think my brain must be softening."

"What is the matter?"

"Matter?" he cried, banging his fist on the table. "Why, it takes a man all his time to find out where he stands in this topsy-turvy city. Just tell me what this commotion is about, will you? It may be easy enough for a Frenchman to understand, but for me—it makes my head swim."

He listened attentively while I explained the situation, asking a question here and there, and turning the answers over in his mind.

"Oh," he observed at the end, "the affair is simple enough after all. The Queen has only to clap Orleans, Condé, and De Retz into the Bastille, and the trick is done. If their friends grumbled, why they could go too, and fight out their quarrels in prison. What is the use of being a Queen if you don't rule?"

"Your plan is excellent, but it would bring about civil war, and we don't want that."

"But you have it now!" he objected quickly. "What else was the visit of the mob to the Palace the other night? And this Condé—he issues his orders like a king, though according to you he is only a subject. I would have no such subjects in my country."

"The trouble must be over soon. The King will be proclaimed of age on his fourteenth birthday, and all parties will rally round him."

"A good thing for the country!" said he, rising. "Well, I must get back; I am on guard to-night."

It was dreary work sitting in my room alone, so, putting on my hat, I strolled into the streets, and finally found myself at the house in the Rue Crillon. Madame Coutance was at home, and she received me with high good-humour, calling me one of her knights-errant, and declaring I had helped to save her life, which was really true.

It was interesting to observe how differently the two ladies regarded the same circumstance. The elder one could talk only of the romantic parts; the challenge of the mob, the defiance, the fight, the arrival of the soldiers, the torchlight procession, the humbling of De Retz. Marie, on the contrary, cared little for these things; all her anxiety was for the people who had been injured.

"The more I see of these troubles, the more hateful they become," she said. "They have divided families, and parted friends; they have starved the poor and desolated the country, and no good has resulted from them."

"The country requires a strong man like Condé to hold the reins," remarked her aunt.

"Or a learned priest like De Retz," I put in slily, and was met at once by strong expressions of dissent; Marie, in particular, declaring she would rather hear of the recall of Mazarin, which I ventured to prophesy would be the outcome of these petty squabbles.

The girl seemed rather sad, and I was not surprised when she said, "I wish we were back at Aunay, away from the turmoil. There is no peace in this continual whirl of excitement. I am always thinking some evil is going to happen."

"Nonsense," exclaimed her aunt. "How can there be any danger now that Condé has returned to his rightful place? De Retz will never dare to harm the prince's friends," a naïve remark, which much amused me.

It was late when I left the house, and the street was nearly deserted. Standing a moment on the step, I suddenly became aware of an ill-dressed fellow evidently watching me from the shelter of a door-way nearly opposite.

"A spy!" I concluded, "and a very clumsy one, too. I wonder if he has been set to dog me?"

I crossed the road carelessly, when the fellow, no doubt hoping he had not been noticed, slipped off, and, on my following a short distance, he darted into a narrow street and disappeared. Puzzled by this strange behaviour, I hid in the shadow of a wall, and kept a patient watch for over an hour, but he did not return.

"Chut!" I exclaimed at last, "Raoul has shaken my nerves with his warning of Peleton and Maubranne. Most likely the man did not know me from Adam." I endeavoured to dismiss the incident from my mind, yet I could think of little else during the walk home, and even the next day the memory of it clung to me. It seemed absurd to suppose that any one would spy on my actions, but in those days nothing was too absurd to be true.

"Well," I thought, "it can soon be tested. I will visit the Rue Crillon again to-night, and keep a sharp look-out."

The streets as usual were extremely noisy; the citizens were out in crowds, and several slight scuffles occurred between the friends of Condé and De Retz. Taking no notice of these squabbles, I proceeded briskly to the Rue Crillon, and there found my man in his hiding-place. He was carefully watching the house opposite, but as soon as I appeared within sight he vanished.

"Oh, oh," said I to myself, with a chuckle, "it is Madame Coutance you are watching, is it? Well, my friend, you will find that two can play at that game!" and, discovering a quiet corner, I stood flattened against the wall with my face muffled.

Two hours passed, but the man did not re-appear, and, when midnight arrived without any incident, I left the Rue Crillon, which was now almost deserted.

In a side street a number of people were cheering loudly for Condé, and farther on I met half a dozen cavaliers evidently returning from some meeting. One was Baron Maubranne. Willing to keep out of mischief, I drew aside to let him pass, hoping he would not recognise me. He passed on singing lustily, but a second man stared insolently into my face. Keeping my temper, though my fingers itched to chastise the fellow, I went on my way, thinking the danger past; but in this I was wrong.

To reach the Pont Neuf it was necessary to traverse a narrow dingy court, and here my life and my story nearly came to an end together.

Still thinking of the mysterious spy in the Rue Crillon, and not at all of Maubranne's friends, I proceeded slowly, paying little heed to my route. Happily for me the court was very quiet; the inmates had retired to rest, and nothing broke the stillness of the night.

Suddenly I stopped, with my hand on my sword, and listened intently. From behind came the

swift patter of footsteps, and turning round I perceived dimly the figure of a man gliding along in the shadow of the wall. Before I could get my sword free he sprang at me, and, in endeavouring to avoid the blow, I fell heavily. With a jeering laugh the assassin flourished his sword, and, as I caught sight of his face, all hope vanished, for the man was Peleton. Looking down at me, he gripped his weapon more firmly, and prepared to strike home.

"You are a clever lad," said he tauntingly, "but all the skill in the world won't save you now. I intend to pay off my old debts."

The fall had half stunned me, but the sound of his voice and the gleam of steel brought back my senses. I was struggling to regain my feet, when I heard a hoarse shout, and the next instant Peleton's weapon went flying into the air. A second man had run up hurriedly, and was gripping my assailant's arm.

"Fool!" cried he, "can't you wait? Don't you know the Abbé has need of him? A plague on your stupid temper; it will ruin everything. Put up your sword, M. de Lalande," for by now I was standing on guard, "our friend here has made a trifling mistake, that is all."

It was difficult to refrain from laughing at the man's coolness. He spoke as if a sword thrust was a matter hardly to be considered; but I thanked him, nevertheless, for having saved my life.

"Not at all, not at all!" he replied. "There is nothing to be thankful for. I only grudged my friend the pleasure of paying his score before my own account was settled."

By this time I had recognised Maubranne, who, for some reason best known to himself, had interfered to prevent my being killed. Now he rejoined Peleton, who meanwhile had groped about in the darkness and recovered his sword, and the two worthies departed together, leaving me in a state of considerable amazement.

CHAPTER XIV.

I Fall into a Trap.

For a short while I remained trying to understand clearly what had happened, but it was all so strange that I could make nothing of it. There was, of course, no mystery in Peleton's attempt on my life, but what was I to think of Maubranne's rescue?

The baron had distinctly stated I had no reason to thank him, I was only enjoying a respite, and that for the oddest of reasons—the Abbé had need of me! What could be made of so astounding a remark as that? De Retz was no friend to me, while almost every act of mine had been opposed to his interests. Without having the least suspicion as to the actual truth, I felt that the Abbé's plans boded me no good. I was like a person groping in the darkness, and expecting every moment to fall into a deep pit.

"Can't you wait?" Maubranne had asked.

For what was Peleton to wait? And how could it affect me? Why should the fellow's temper spoil everything? From Maubranne's words it appeared that the success of their scheme, whatever it was, depended on me. Yet from the very beginning I had fought them tooth and nail.

"This business will drive me crazy," I muttered, "it is worse than the muddle at La Boule d'Or. Both these blackguards would gladly give me a few inches of steel, and yet, having me wholly in their power, they do me no injury. It is evident that I, in some manner, am to further the interests of their party. Am I to be offered a bribe?"

This was making myself out to be a person of some consequence, but I could think of nothing else. However, it was useless to stand there all night, so, keeping a keen look-out for fresh danger, I hurried from the court and made straight for the Pont Neuf. A few night-birds were abroad, but I passed on swiftly, keeping well within the shadow of the walls.

As it chanced, the night's adventures were not finished even yet. Turning into the Rue des Carolines, I was almost at home, when a man, slipping from the shadow of a doorway, swung a lantern in my face. Peleton's cowardly attack had put me on my guard, and in less than a second my sword was at the fellow's throat.

He was either very stupid or very brave.

"M. de Lalande?" said he quietly, and, thrusting a folded paper into my hand, vanished.

I ran a few yards hoping to catch him, but he was soon swallowed up in the darkness, and there was nothing for it but to return. In my room I opened the packet with nervous haste. The

letter, or rather note, consisted of only a few words, and had no signature. I gazed at the writing curiously, it was cramped, partly illegible, and in a man's hand. By supplying a letter here and there I managed to piece together the strange message.

"When the net is spread openly, only a foolish bird will be ensnared. A wise one will fly away. An old story relates how a swallow once found safety in the tents of an army."

Nothing more! I read it through again and again till I had learned every word by heart. Who wrote it? I knew not. I counted no friends among the enemy, and danger was hardly likely to come from Raoul's party. Peleton's attempt to murder me was merely the outcome of personal spite, and had nothing to do with this fresh adventure. Yet, on one point, the message was clear. Some peril threatened me, and my best chance of safety lay in flight. But why? I sat down to thresh the matter out.

Including my cousin, I had three enemies. Henri disliked me, because I had, to a certain extent, spoiled his plans; yet I did not, for an instant, imagine that he sought my life—that was out of all reason. There remained Maubranne and Peleton, either of whom would kill me without scruple, but that very night the baron had interfered to save my life! Once more I was forced back on the mystery attached to his words. What was it the Abbé proposed to do with me? Buzz! buzz! buzz! The question hummed in my head till I was nearly wild. It went with me to bed, it kept me awake half the night, and was the first thing I was conscious of in the morning.

Directly after breakfast, I hurried to the Luxembourg to take counsel with Raoul. He was on duty, but young D'Arçy, observing my agitation, volunteered to relieve him.

"What is it?" asked my comrade anxiously. "Has anything happened? Here, come into this room where we shall not be interrupted."

Without delay I plunged into the story, telling him first of the mysterious spy in the Rue Crillon, the encounter with Peleton, and Maubranne's strange action and words.

"Well, my friend," said he, "you have an adventure on hand now that ought to keep your time fairly occupied! I don't understand it in the least, but it is plain you have become an important person. There is one thing I would like to know, but don't answer if you would rather not. Are you in Mazarin's secrets?"

"I have heard nothing of the Cardinal since my visit to Aunay."

"Then that notion falls to the ground. I thought De Retz might imagine you could give him some useful information. And yet, I don't know. People say he is already in the Queen's confidence."

"Well," I remarked, "if the first chapter is exciting, what do you think of the second?" and I showed him the warning note, which he read with a strangely puzzled air.

"Where did this come from?" he asked, and I informed him, adding that the messenger was a total stranger whom I should be unable to recognise.

"Still," said he, "it shows there is some one in the Abbé's confidence who wishes you well. I wonder if it can be Madame de Chevreuse? She is concerned with most of his plans."

"I have not met her since the night of the ball and besides, this is a man's writing."

"That can be accounted for easily; she employs several secretaries."

I shook my head, saying Madame de Chevreuse was not likely to interest herself in my welfare.

After walking about the room for a time, Raoul stopped and exclaimed, "Suppose we are looking at the matter from the wrong side? How can you be certain this note comes from a friend? It may be a trick to lure you away from Paris!"

"If so, it will fail. I will not leave the city for an hour, even were Turenne to offer me the command of a regiment."

"Why not accept service with the Duke? You would be in a much safer position."

"No. I will see this thing through alone. I will not budge a foot for all the fighting priests in the country."

"Don't be over venturesome. De Retz is a crafty foe and is playing just now for high stakes. If rumour speaks true, he is going to try a fall with Condé himself. Now I must set Armand at liberty, but I will come to your rooms at the first opportunity. Meanwhile, if you require help, a note will bring me instantly."

I returned home still in a state of bewilderment. The mystery was as dark as ever, and, cudgel my brains as I would, I could throw no light on it.

That same evening I laid the case before John Humphreys, but naturally he was unable to offer any explanation.

"Show me an enemy," said he, "and I will stand up against him, but I am a poor hand at fighting shadows. However, it is plain enough that some one has marked you down, and you will have to walk warily."

That, indeed, was the only advice any one could offer. The thing which troubled me most at this time was the presence of the spy in the Rue Crillon. The ladies apparently had not noticed him, so I said nothing to them, but continued to keep a strict watch on the mysterious stranger who night after night prowled about near their house. What he expected to gain was difficult to imagine, as he neither followed Madame Coutance abroad nor attempted to molest her. At first I thought him a clumsy fellow, but twice when I tried to catch him he vanished cleverly down the narrow streets.

One evening, while strolling carelessly along the Rue Pierre, I met my cousin Henri. He was wearing a long mantle with a hood, and appeared in a great hurry. To my surprise, however, he stopped and exclaimed quite cordially, "Ah, cousin, you are a stranger! I have not seen you for a long time. I was sorry to hear of Peleton's mad prank. Were you hurt?"

"No," said I, rather shortly.

"You are a lucky fellow, Albert. For a lad from the country, you have done well. *Peste!* You have made quite a splash in the world, and I am proud of my cousin."

"You do me great honour," said I, with a mocking bow.

"Not more than you deserve. By the way, is it true that you have joined Condé's party?"

"Why?"

"Because you were with his mob when Madame Coutance behaved so stupidly."

"I did my best to save a woman from being torn to pieces—nothing more."

"It was very gallant of you," and then, as an afterthought, "so you still fancy there is a chance of Mazarin's return?"

"There may be, or not. I only know that I am pledged to assist him, and that the De Lalandes have been taught to keep their word."

"Quite right!" returned Henri, gaily. "Well, adieu, my faithful cousin! Your constancy is touching, and I hope it may bring you good fortune, but of that I am doubtful," and, with a careless laugh, he hurried on.

"Planning some fresh mischief!" I muttered, and dismissed the incident from my mind.

Nearly a week had now passed since the receipt of the mysterious note, and nothing of consequence had happened. Every day I went into the streets without disguise or attempt at concealment, and no one paid any attention to my doings.

About this time the city was considerably agitated, and filled with all sorts of conflicting rumours. Among other things it was hinted that Mazarin, having re-entered France, was marching at the head of a foreign army on Paris, with the avowed object of razing it to the ground.

De Retz, laughing in his sleeve, went about attended by a numerous and well-armed retinue to protect him from being murdered; Condé followed his example, and the *petits maîtres* swaggered more than ever, especially when they met the friends of De Retz; at the Hôtel Vendôme, the Duke of Beaufort stayed in bed, having, according to rumour, been poisoned; while Gaston of Orleans was popularly supposed to have joined four separate plots in one day, and betrayed them all to the Queen before night. Thus far, however, nothing serious had resulted from these wonderful doings, and I was chiefly concerned with my own private affairs.

"It seems to me," I said to Raoul one night, as we walked together toward the Rue Crillon, "that we have been making a mountain out of a mole-hill. More than a week has passed now since the warning, and I am none the worse."

"Yet the spy still keeps watch?"

"He was there last night, but I could not get near him. Perhaps you may have better luck."

The man was in his usual place, and I pointed him out to Raoul, whispering, "That is he. Are you acquainted with him?"

"No. He belongs to the class that either De Retz or Condé can buy by the dozen. Don't look that way. Let us cross the road. I will slip through this alley and enter the street at the other end; then we shall have him between us."

Unfortunately for our purpose the fellow was particularly wide-awake, and as Raoul appeared at the corner he moved away. Following cautiously, we kept him in sight for a good distance, but finally he disappeared in a maze of alleys.

"*Peste!*" exclaimed my comrade, discontentedly, "he is an artful rascal. If we could catch him he might be able to tell us all we want to learn. There must be some reason for his actions. Is he always alone?"

"Always."

"We must set a trap for him."

"Let me try once more by myself. I dislike the idea of being beaten by a spy."

"As you will; and if you fail, I will borrow some troopers from the Luxembourg and lay him by the heels. At all events the fellow will know who pays him."

The next night I set off for the Rue Crillon, and, after spending an hour or two with Marie and her aunt, went back into the street. My man, as usual, was in full view, and it appeared to me, rather overdid his part, as if he was anxious to attract my attention.

However, there was not much leisure for reflection, and I walked quickly and boldly towards him, when he immediately made off. Angry at being baulked so often, and determined to discover his business, I followed sharply, and nearly caught him at the bottom of the narrow street running at right angles to the Rue Crillon. A stupid charcoal-burner lost me my advantage here, but perceiving which way the spy went I hurried on in the same direction.

For half an hour I patiently tracked my quarry, through a network of narrow streets and alleys crossing and re-crossing each other like an Eastern puzzle. By this time I was hopelessly astray, never having been in that quarter, which was one of the worst in the city. Under other circumstances I should have feared to trust myself in those horrible courts, but now I did not even remember the danger.

Presently the spy himself seemed doubtful as to which turning to take. He stood a moment in apparent hesitation, but, finding me close on his heels, darted as if at random up a narrow entrance. It was a *cul-de-sac* containing perhaps half a dozen houses, and I chuckled inwardly on finding how completely he had trapped himself. I could not have desired a better place for my purpose. The court was very quiet; the houses were old and dilapidated, and the inmates had either gone to bed or had not returned from their nightly wanderings. We two had a clear stage to ourselves.

The man was a regular coward after all. He looked this way and that with frightened eyes, ran on a few paces as if hoping to find a way out, came back, and finally made a dash to get past me.

"Oh, ho, not so fast, my good fellow!" I cried, barring his path. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"I have lost my way, monsieur," he answered in a whining voice.

"How strange! So have I! We may as well keep each other company. Don't look like that, I am not going to hurt you."

"I feared monsieur meant to kill me," he whimpered.

"Bah! I only want a little information, which will be well paid for. Are you willing to earn ten crowns?"

"Ten crowns, monsieur? Certainly."

"Then tell me what you do in the Rue Crillon and who pays you? Answer these questions and here are the ten crowns."

"And if not, monsieur?" said he, still whining like a beggar.

"If not it will be the worse for you. Quick, make your choice, I cannot stay here for ever."

It was the rascal's turn now to laugh, as some one, throwing a heavy mantle over my head, tripped me up violently.

"His sword, quick! Take it away! Tie his arms firmly; he is a mad bull for fighting. Now his pistols, François, you fat pig! Softly monsieur! Tap him on the head if he struggles. Are you ready, Pierre? What a time! are your fingers in knots? Now, monsieur, your choice—will you come quietly or must we use force?"

I lay on the ground half dazed and only partly understanding the fellow's meaning, so, to awaken my interest he repeated his questions, pressing one of my own pistols to my head.

"Take that thing away," I said, "and help me to my feet. You have the upper hand at present."

Laughing mischievously, he withdrew the weapon, and his companions, pushing me upright, half led, half dragged me into one of the dilapidated houses. We ascended a flight of stairs, went along a narrow passage, and so into a room which had been prepared for my reception.

At least, that was the conclusion I arrived at when two of the men having gone out, the third said, "Monsieur, there is a bed of straw in the corner, the door is bolted, the window barred, and I am going to keep watch inside all night, while Pierre and François relieve each other outside the door."

I could not see the speaker, as the room was in darkness, but his voice sounded familiar, and I tried, but in vain, to remember where I had heard it before. However, this did not matter, so I lay down on the straw, and wondered what the adventure meant.

Who were my gaolers, and what did they intend to do with me? Presently Maubranne's words flashed into my mind, and set me thinking that this might be a move in the plot at which the mysterious note hinted. Just how De Retz could make use of me I had not the faintest notion, but he was a clever schemer, and had, presumably, laid his plans carefully. However, as no amount of speculation on this head would improve matters, I began to reflect on the best way of escape. My arms were tightly bound, the door was well secured, the window barred, and a gaoler, wide-awake and armed, sat between me and it. Altogether the prospect was far from cheering.

"Sleep will perhaps bring counsel," I muttered, and, turning on my side, I dozed off into a light, restless slumber.

With the coming of day I was able to make an inspection of my new abode. The room was small, dirty, out of repair, and destitute of furniture. In the corner opposite to mine was another heap of straw, and on it sat the man whom long ago I had gagged and bound in the chamber at La Boule d'Or, and who afterwards was my companion from Aunay to Paris. Perceiving that I recognised him, the rascal showed his teeth in a broad grin, and exclaimed, "The wheel has turned, monsieur! It seems that we have changed parts."

"And you are uppermost this time," I answered, striving to speak good-humouredly, for it is a bad plan to quarrel with one's gaoler.

Rising and taking a turn round the room, Pillot stood still at my side.

"Listen to me, monsieur," said he. "Some months ago I lost the game to you and you acted like a lad of honour. When your own life was in danger you remembered me, and I am still grateful. Now let me give you a friendly warning. Of course, you are planning to get away. Abandon the idea, as you cannot escape alive. There is an armed man beneath the window, while Pierre or François will knock you on the head without the least hesitation. We all have our orders."

"*Merci!* It is just as well to know what one has to expect. Do the orders include starving your prisoner?"

"Here comes François in reply to the question; but you must pass your word not to take advantage if I unbind you."

After a moment's reflection I gave the required promise, upon which Pillot untied my arms, and then, opening the door, admitted François, who carried the food.

"Here is breakfast, monsieur," said the dwarf, making an elaborate bow. "It is not as good as the supper we enjoyed together in the village inn, but François has not had much experience in the character of host. Later on he will doubtless acquit himself better."

CHAPTER XV.

Under Watch and Ward.

As soon as breakfast ended my arms were bound again, and François took his departure, leaving me with Pillot, who could not conceal his amusement at my plight.

"Pardon me, monsieur," said he laughing, "it is comical! You expected to trap François, and behold, you are caught yourself!"

I tried to look at the rascal sternly, but the humour of the thing tickled me so, that I joined in the laugh myself. Truly I had gone out for wool, and should return shorn!

"Tell me," said I presently, "am I forbidden to ask questions?"

"Why, no! Indeed it would be impossible to stop monsieur, unless a gag were placed in his mouth," and thinking, probably, of the incident at La Boule d'Or, he showed his teeth in a broad grin.

"A truce to your mummery," I cried; "will you answer my questions?"

"I do not remember that monsieur has asked any?"

"Well, here is one. How long am I to be kept in this den?"

"It is impossible to say precisely, but monsieur will not continue to occupy this apartment for more than a day or two."

"A day or two?" I thought my ears must have played me false. Noticing my surprise, he added, "Monsieur will have done his part by that time."

"What will happen then?"

"Ah!" said he, shrugging his shoulders and raising his eyes, "who can tell? We are all in the hands of Providence."

"True, my friend, but I am also in the hands of De Retz, which is hardly as pleasant. It seems that I have suddenly become a person of some consequence!"

"Sufficiently important to have made many enemies, monsieur!"

"De Retz among them?"

"Chut! no; he would be pleased to call you his friend. I was thinking of personal enemies like M. Peleton and the Baron Maubranne. The Abbé and M. de Lalande will only use you for the good of the Cause; but I distrust the others."

"The good of the Cause? You speak in riddles, my friend!"

"It is necessary, monsieur; as it is, I have spoken too much."

"But you will answer one other question? Why did that wretched François prowl about the Rue Crillon?"

Pillot burst into a peal of such merry laughter that I thought he would be choked, and it was long before he could reply.

"Pardon me, monsieur," he exclaimed at length, "but really the joke was excellent. François acted the spy only when you were about; and simply to attract your attention. He was the bait, and you—pardon the expression—were the fish, though I, for one, did not expect to see you landed so easily."

Pillot's explanation made the affair a trifle plainer, and showed how foolishly I had acted. Instead of being a stupid dolt, this François was really a clever fellow, who had tricked me admirably. My cheeks burned as I saw what a dupe I had been. As a matter of fact, he could have slipped away at any moment, instead of which he had purposely lured me on. His hesitation at the corner of the *cul-de-sac*, his apparent attempt to dash past me, his whining answers, all had their purpose, and, while I reckoned myself master of the situation, Pillot and the third man were creeping out of their hiding-places. Truly, I had myself been a stupid dolt!

Still there was one point which puzzled me, and I asked Pillot why the fellow waited so long before playing his trick.

"François obeys orders," he replied. "It would not have suited our purpose to have shut you up before last night."

This sounded mysterious, but Pillot would not enlighten me further, and alone I could make nothing of it. Except on one point, the dwarf talked freely enough, and was a very agreeable gaoler. A true child of Paris, he knew the city well, and having been mixed up in all sorts of adventures, was able to relate numerous startling stories. The time passed pleasantly enough till about eleven o'clock, when he went away, and his place was taken by the man called Pierre.

At first I was rather glad of the change, imagining this fellow might be more simple, as indeed he was; so simple, in fact, that he knew nothing. He was a short man with a massive head, thick neck, broad shoulders, and limbs like those of a gladiator. He sniffed contemptuously at the pistols which Pillot had left, but handled a huge iron-shod club lovingly, and on being spoken to, grunted like a pig. Sitting on the straw, he laid the club beside him, and, having cleared a space, produced a dice-box and dice, with which he played left hand against right.

After watching this monotonous game for half-an-hour, and finding Pierre absolutely deaf to my questions, I turned my face to the wall and tried to think. Pillot's conversation had explained

many things, but unfortunately it threw no light on the reason for my imprisonment. He had not denied that De Retz was the man behind the curtain, but what was it the Abbé wished me to do?

The more I puzzled the more mysterious the affair looked. I invented a thousand reasons, all more or less fantastic and absurd, till my mind grew wearied with thinking. Meanwhile, Pierre sat on his heap of straw calmly playing his ridiculous game, calling out the numbers as the dice fell, but keenly alive to the slightest sound.

Thus miserably the afternoon wore away; the room grew dark; Pierre packed up his dice, and, walking to the barred window, peered into the darkness. I wondered whether Raoul or John Humphreys had called at my rooms, and if so, what they would think of my sudden disappearance.

Presently, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps; the door was unfastened, and Pillot entered with a couple of candles stuck in broken bottles, which only served to make the place more dreary than before. Then François followed with some supper, and after he and Pierre had departed, my gaoler did the honours of the table—or rather the floor—like a generous host bent on pleasing his guest to the utmost.

He was rather excited, and talked so freely that I hoped to worm some information out of him, but the rascal guarded his tongue well, only letting fall a hint that we might take a long journey on the following night. Still I gathered from his air of mystery, and the importance he displayed, that the plot—whatever its nature—was rapidly ripening.

"Now, monsieur," he observed, when we had finished supper, "I shall leave you to the care of François. Remember my warning, and do not attempt to escape, because it is useless. If all goes well we shall be able to provide you with better accommodation in a day or two. Meanwhile, you have only to enjoy yourself, and to thank the kind friends who are keeping you out of mischief."

Having finished this pretty speech he took his departure, the door was fastened, and François began his watch for the night. Afraid, perhaps, of falling asleep, he stalked up and down the room, stopping occasionally beside my bed to hope that monsieur found himself well. François was more polished than Pierre, and certainly replied to my questions. Only, whatever I asked, he answered, "I am truly sorry, monsieur, but I do not know."

The fellow might have been a talking bird that had been taught to repeat but one sentence. As a last effort I offered him a heavy bribe for his information, but he was too honest to betray his trust, or, which was just as probable, he had no wares of any marketable value.

I slept that night by fits and starts, but whether asleep or awake my mind was filled with omens of evil. What was happening in the outside world? Again and again I asked the question without finding any answer.

Spurred on by my fears, I began to dream of escape, but the adventure was so absolutely impossible that I had to abandon the idea. My arms were tightly bound; François walked up and down, ever watchful and alert, carrying his half pike; outside the door lay Pierre with his huge club, while Pillot was within call; and I had a suspicion that he was not the least capable of my gaolers. No, it was evident that I must wait till a more favourable opportunity presented itself.

I watched the earliest streaks of light streaming through the barred window, and, though it was summer time, I shivered with cold. The dawn broadened, became morning; a few wandering sunbeams that had lost their way came peeping through the bars and cheered me, though their stay was brief. Later, sounds of life arose outside; I heard Pierre's deep tones, followed by Pillot's milder ones, and presently the door was opened.

Now, had my arms been free at this moment I would have made a dash for liberty, in spite of Pierre's club and Pillot's pistols, but, in the circumstances, it was madness to think of such a venture; so I lay still. François by now was almost too sleepy to walk straight, and Pillot, bright, fresh, alert as a bird, entered on the duties of gaoler.

The prisoner who feeds with his keeper is not likely to starve, and I certainly cannot accuse my captors of being niggardly in the matter of food. On this particular morning Pillot was too agitated to eat; twice he jumped up and walked to the window; indeed, but for my exertions, the breakfast would have been removed untasted. As it chanced, my appetite remained good, and, in view of the possible journey, I ate for both.

Only once during the day did Pillot leave the room, and then his place was taken by Pierre, who, in less than three minutes, was deep in his usual game of throwing the dice, left hand against right. To do the villain justice, however, he did not neglect his duty. His eyes were upon me frequently, while at the slightest stir, he turned quick as lightning, one hand grasping his ponderous club.

Toward the middle of the afternoon Pillot returned, and kept me company for the remainder of the day. He was deeply excited, and as the evening approached began to bubble over. He would break off in the middle of a sentence, and, running to the window, listen intently, holding up his hand meanwhile for silence. François, too, who came in once or twice, seemed equally agitated, but Pierre, I have no doubt, was calmly playing, interested chiefly in the result of his

game. Perhaps he did not understand why the others were so anxious, or why they spoke to each other in low whispers!

As for me, I soon became as deeply interested as Pillot. Why did he listen at the window? Did he expect to hear some pre-arranged signal, or the rattle of the carriage which was to bear me away?

Once I nearly tricked him into betraying the secret. He had dispatched François on some errand, and was pacing the room restlessly, when I said at a venture, and in a careless tone, "So the grand coup is to be made to-night?"

"This very evening, monsieur!" and he rubbed his hands briskly.

"It will cause an immense sensation?"

"A sensation? *Corbleu!* There will be——" He checked himself, looked at me slily, and finished by saying, "Ah, yes, monsieur, perhaps so." Then he returned to the window to listen; so my attempt to catch him by surprise had failed.

Another hour passed, François had returned, and the two stood talking rapidly but in such low tones that I could not catch a word. To judge by their gestures, François was the bearer of fresh news, but whether good or evil I could not determine. It was, however, evidently of considerable significance, and such as to astonish the dwarf.

This secrecy and show of excitement played on my nerves. I became restless and irritable, and chafed more and more at my confinement. Whatever was about to happen, I wished it was over and done with.

The evening wore on, it became dusk, in an hour or two night would fall; but still, as far as I was concerned, there was no change. The two men maintained their position at the window; but they no longer talked; it seemed as if they could only wait. The silence became painful; there was not a sound in the half darkened room; I wondered if my gaolers had forgotten how to breathe. I rustled the straw: they turned swiftly, and Pillot shook his head as if to reprove the action, but he did not speak.

Presently François said something in a low whisper to his companion, and the dwarf in a sort of hoarse scream cried, "Be still. It must be now, I tell you; it was all arranged this afternoon."

After this neither of them spoke, but both stood still and motionless, till suddenly there came to our ears the sounds of hurrying footsteps in the street. It was a relief to hear them, even if the runner had nothing to do with me. They came nearer and nearer; the pace slackened; finally some one stopped beneath the window. Evidently this was the man for whom my captors watched. What news did he bring? Pillot himself could not have waited more anxiously than I did to hear the tidings. I felt sure that in some mysterious way my fate hinged on the words of this unknown messenger.

Very quietly I raised my head from the straw and listened with strained ears. No sound save the heavy breathing of its occupants broke the stillness of the room. At last I seemed likely to hear something which would afford a clue to the mystery; but here again I met with disappointment. Only one word came from the man in the street, and I was scarcely wiser than before.

"Failed!" he said, and immediately began to whistle the air of a popular song, which probably conveyed some information to the dwarf.

Muttering savagely, Pillot ordered the messenger to bring the carriage round, and, turning to me, said more calmly, "Monsieur, the plot has miscarried, and you must leave Paris. I cannot explain further, but you have no choice. Come with me quietly, or——" and he raised his pistol.

My head began to swim again. The plot had failed! What plot? What had I to do with it? Why should these people wish to carry me off? Afterwards, when the truth came out, the affair seemed simple, so simple, that I was ready to laugh at my own stupidity. I tried to obtain some information, but Pillot stopped me promptly. I had never seen him so thoroughly roused; he dug his nails viciously into the palms of his hands; his eyes looked like those of a hunted animal.

"Quick! There is no time to argue. It is a case of life and death for you and me, and perhaps for many besides. I wish you no harm, monsieur! I will save your life if you will let me."

"Set me free," said I, "and I will save my own."

"I cannot do that—for the sake of others."

François had disappeared, but Pierre was in the room, and he toyed nervously with his club. I do not know how the dwarf would have acted, but there was no mistaking his companion's purpose.

"An end to this," he exclaimed. "Come, monsieur—or stay!" and he flourished his huge weapon threateningly.

"It is best, monsieur; it is really best," cried the dwarf. "Ah, *corbleu*, it is too late! Listen! There are the soldiers! Oh, monsieur, what can I do?"

"Bah!" said Pierre, raising his club, "it is his life or ours."

At that moment François, whose face was livid with fear and passion, burst into the room.

"Fly!" cried he, "fly, while you have the chance!"

"Is it the soldiers?" asked Pillot.

"No, worse! Condé's ragamuffins, and they are yelling for M. de Lalande."

At these words I was speechless with amazement, but Pillot cried, "The people? Condé's mob, did you say, François? Then there has been treachery. This is Peleton's work; he wishes to find revenge and safety at one time. Unbind the prisoner, Pierre. Quick, you dolt! I am no murderer, as M. Peleton will find. Monsieur, I give you a chance of your life let what will come of it. François, a sword! Here, monsieur, this way, and the saints preserve us!"

I was free and armed: the door was open; yet I had never stood so near death since my first coming to Paris. From the terrible uproar one would have concluded that the inhabitants of every alley in the city had gathered outside. The street door was being smashed by heavy blows, and, as I ran out on the landing, a fierce mob swarmed up the stairs, screaming, yelling, and shouting for De Lalande.

There was no time to ask questions or even to think. Carried away by passion, the people were thirsting for my blood, though why, I could not imagine. Was this a part of the plot too? What did it all mean? No one had ever called me a coward, but at that moment my limbs trembled, and perspiration oozed from every pore. The cries of the mob were more awful than the roar of some savage beast.

"Quick!" cried Pillot, "it is an affair of seconds," and then every sound was drowned in a fierce shout of "Where is he? Death to the assassin! Kill them all!"

"No, no," exclaimed one voice, louder than the rest, "the others may be honest folk! Only one came in. I saw him! I shall know him! You can tell him by his gay dress!"

"That is Peleton, the scoundrel!" said Pillot "If you are killed now, he will be safe," and the dwarf hurried me along.

With bull-dog courage Pierre and François stood at the head of the stairs, demanding to know why their house was invaded, and denying that any one had recently entered.

"A lie! A lie!" shouted Peleton from lower down. "I chased him all the way, and saw him enter here!"

"Stand aside," commanded a second man, "and let us search the house, or it will be the worse for you!"

Pierre and François were both sturdy fellows, but they could not have held the stairway long, and besides, why should they sacrifice their lives for me?

From where we were the mob was out of sight, and we could not perceive what was going on, but it seemed as if they hesitated, when suddenly the cry of "The soldiers" was raised. Then, making his final effort, Peleton urged the mob on with renewed shouts of "Kill the assassin!"

At the end of the passage three steps led down to a room, the door of which was locked, but Pillot possessed the key. We could hear the crowd rushing up the stairs and on to the landing; another moment and we should be too late, but my companion, who had recovered from his nervousness, succeeded in opening the door.

"The window!" he exclaimed, pushing me forward. "Quick! I will put up the bars and follow."

CHAPTER XVI.

I become a Prisoner of the Bastille.

I ran across the room and then stopped suddenly: it was a cowardly action to leave the man to face my enemies alone!

"Fly, monsieur, fly!" he implored.

"Not I, Pillot, until we can go together. You have stood by me, I will stand by you. The bars are up? Good! That will delay them a moment. Can we move this chest? Take one end and we will try. *Ma foi!* 'twill be quite a war of the barricades! Now this table. 'Tis heavy! So much the better. Here they come!"

With a roar the mob swept along the landing. Our door, which was strong and massive, withstood for a time their heaviest blows.

"Now, monsieur, the window!" cried Pillot; "the barricade will soon be down. This way. *Peste!*" and he uttered a groan.

In the excitement he had forgotten, and I had not noticed, that the window was barred.

"We have trapped ourselves, M. de Lalande!" he exclaimed bitterly. "There is no way out!"

"Chut! The bars will break," said I, clambering to the ledge, and grasping the middle one; but it was very thick and firmly fixed.

The roar of the mob outside doubled my energy; I pulled and tugged with all my might, skinning my hands in the effort. Hammer, bang, crash! behind me. How long would our defences stand? Would the soldiers arrive in time? Would the bar never loosen? Surely it was giving! Yes! I could have shouted aloud in triumph—it was yielding! Another wrench would be sufficient! Oh, for the strength of twenty men! Now!

A yell of joy and a groan of despair announced that I was too late. The door was down, the table overturned, the room was filled with the howling mob. They were headed by two men, one dressed as a charcoal-burner, the other as a mason. Each, however, carried a good sword, and in spite of their disguises I recognised them as Maubranne and Peleton.

"There he is!" cried the baron pointing to me, and again the appalling shouts of "Kill the assassin!" were raised.

For these poor deluded people, led away by such scoundrels, I felt only a deep pity, but my anger rose hot against Maubranne and Peleton. Why did they call me assassin? Why endeavour to take my life and to blacken my good name at the same time?

At the last pinch Peleton hung behind, but the baron, who did not lack courage, advanced, and the mob followed with a hideous roar. Do not imagine that I wish to set myself up for a hero. At that terrible moment I had no thought of anything, and what I did was done almost unconsciously.

Maubranne came first, while behind him waved a forest of clubs and staves. I saw in his eyes that he intended to kill me, and, rendered desperate by fear, I leaped at him, plunging my sword into his breast. He dropped heavily, and for the moment an intense hush fell on the startled crowd. As if by inspiration I saw my one chance and seized it eagerly.

"Citizens!" I cried, gazing boldly on the sea of angry faces, "that man lied to you. He is no charcoal-burner, but the Baron Maubranne, Condé's bitterest enemy. I am ignorant of what has happened in Paris. Two nights ago this Maubranne set a trap for me and shut me up here."

"That is true," exclaimed Pillot. "Maubranne was the plotter, this lad is innocent; he does not even guess why you wish to kill him!"

Would they believe? Was it possible? My heart almost ceased beating as I gazed at the fierce faces. The weapons were lowered. Staring at each other dubiously, the men hesitated, and I breathed more freely. I had forgotten Peleton, who, safe behind the human screen, cried savagely, "Kill the murderer! Down with the assassin!"

That served his purpose better than the finest argument. Heated by passion the people thought no more of the dead charcoal-burner but only of his slayer, and made a movement to surround me. My last hope had failed, but I stood on guard, my one regret being that the cowardly Peleton would not trust himself within reach of my sword.

Now, however, another sound mingled with the shouts of the populace, and a swift glance showed that the soldiers were forcing a passage into the crowded room.

"Make way there!" exclaimed the leader in a tone of authority. "In the King's name! Drop that pike, you rascal, or I'll run you through. Where is this M. de Lalande?"

At first it appeared certain that there would be a terrible conflict between the mob and the soldiers, but the officer, by a lucky hit, not only saved my life—at least for the time—but cajoled the crowd into good humour.

"Is this the fellow who slew Condé?" he asked, to which came an answering chorus of "Yes, yes! Down with the murderer!"

Until that moment I had no idea what my supposed crime was, and the officer's question filled me with horror. Condé dead! and I charged with murder! It seemed monstrous, impossible.

But the officer was speaking, and I must try to understand.

"Do you want all who were in the plot punished?" and again there broke out an assenting yell.

"Then let me remove this lad, you imbeciles! If you knock him on the head now, it will be all over: while, if he is imprisoned, the authorities will soon discover his accomplices."

This suggestion met with a torrent of applause, and the ruffians offered no further resistance to the soldiers, who, forming in a body, marched me downstairs into the court where they had left their horses. I was immediately placed on one and firmly bound; the troopers mounted, the officer issued his orders, and we set off accompanied by the mob.

The city was in a state of seething excitement, which increased wherever our procession came in view. The people, pouring from the houses in thousands, blocked the roads until they became almost impassable, and the leader of the horsemen was in despair. Every one wished to see the wretch who had murdered Condé, and numbers shook their fists at me and cried, "Kill the assassin!"

Some, however, regarded me as a martyr, and angry cries against the soldiers, mingled with shouts of "Down with Condé!" began to be heard. At one spot in particular a determined rush was made by a number of burly ruffians directed by a little man from the window of a corner house. I recognised my late gaoler, Pillot, and was glad that he had escaped, though much afraid that his attempted rescue would only make the authorities more certain of my guilt.

Two or three soldiers were knocked over, but the rush was stayed, and after this the friends of De Retz, for such I concluded them to be, confined their attention chiefly to threats. Still the danger of an outbreak was considerable, and the officer in charge, fearful of the consequences, decided to convey me to the Bastille.

By riding through the less frequented streets, and breaking into a trot wherever such a course was possible, we gradually drew ahead of our undesirable escort, and at length turned into the famous avenue. Throughout the journey I had anxiously scanned the faces of the multitude, hoping to see Raoul, or D'Arçy, or my English friend, John Humphreys. But I had not recognised a single acquaintance, and now my heart sank as we halted before the first massive gate, guarded by sentries.

As soon as the drawbridge was lowered, we crossed to the court where the Governor's house was situated, and the officer, dismounting, entered, reappearing in a few minutes with the order for my admission into the fortress. Escorted by two prison officials, I walked up the narrow avenue to the second drawbridge, passed the guard-house, and stood in the wide court, while the ponderous gates clanged behind me, as if shutting out all hope.

"La Calotte de la Bazinière," said one, and the other, bidding me follow, ascended to the highest storey of the nearest tower, and unlocked the door of a room into which I entered—a prisoner of the Bastille!

The turnkey swung his lantern around, hoped—rather sarcastically to my thinking—that I should be comfortable, relocked the door, then the outer door, and I was left, not simply alone and in darkness, but beyond the reach of human hearing. Stumbling across the room, I lay down on a mattress and endeavoured to account for the events of the last two days.

From a few words let fall by the officer, it appeared that some one had killed, or attempted to kill, the prince, and I had been arrested as the assassin. That the plot was hatched by the Abbé's party I had learned from Pillot, though, as it afterwards appeared, no one intended anything more serious than kidnapping Condé and shutting him up in a safe place.

Now, in an enterprise of this daring nature, the actual leader was likely to be my cousin Henri, and working from this I began to piece together a very tolerable story, which after events proved not to have been far wrong. My previous adventures had proved how easy it was to mistake me for my cousin, and on this point the conspiracy hinged. If the plot succeeded, well and good; if not, it was necessary to show that the Abbé's party had nothing to do with the affair.

I was well known as a devoted *Masarin*, and it was no secret that the Cardinal, though banished, still communicated with his friends in the capital. What more likely then, than that the attempt on Condé's life was made by *Masarins*? And if so, who more likely to lead it than the penniless youth who had refused point-blank to join any of the other parties? Mazarin, it would be asserted, must have left me in Paris for this very purpose.

Then again the crafty plotters had so arranged that everything would fit neatly into place. It could easily be proved that I had suddenly disappeared and remained in hiding till the appointed night, when, having failed in my object, I had hurriedly and secretly left the city. This, I concluded, was the outline of the plot, but De Retz and my cousin had not made allowance for the cowardly treachery of Maubranne and Peleton.

These worthies, by both of whom I had the honour of being much hated, had worked out a different, and to them, a much more satisfactory ending. If Condé's assassin could be caught, red-handed as it were, and slain by the angry people, there would be an end to the business. For this

purpose they had conducted the mob to my prison, but the speedy arrival of the soldiers had upset their plans; Maubranne was dead, and I lay on a mattress in La Calotte de la Bazinière.

"*Peste!*" I exclaimed irritably, "I have intrigued myself into an ugly mess. This comes of being too clever. What will they do with me, I wonder?"

The situation was indeed serious. With the exception of Raoul, D'Arçy, and John Humphreys, I had no friends, and these three could do little. De Retz would naturally use all his powerful influence to prove my guilt, and as likely as not I should be condemned without a trial. As far as I could judge the future did not look particularly bright.

As soon as dawn came straggling through the window I rose and peered about me. The room arched to support the roof, and only in the middle was it possible to stand upright. It contained but one window, having, both outside and inside, double iron gratings. The furniture consisted of a worm-eaten chair, a table with a leg broken, an empty jug, a mattress, and two flagstones on which in cold weather a fire could be built.

Raoul once told me of a man who had escaped from the Bastille, but I fancy he could not have been lodged in my cell. I could tell by the window that the walls were tremendously thick, while the door was of iron, and fastened on the outside by massive bolts. Still I was not altogether discouraged, and, dragging the table beneath the aperture, I climbed to the top. Crash! I had forgotten the broken leg, and fell to the ground, wrecking the table and giving myself a considerable shock.

After that I lay down again on the mattress till about nine o'clock, as near as I could judge, when there was a noise outside as of bolts being withdrawn, and the turnkey entered the room with my breakfast. He was a short, sturdy man, somewhat after the build of Pierre, but with a more intelligent face.

"Monsieur has met with an accident?" he said, gazing with a grin at the ruined table.

"I knocked the wretched thing over."

"Ah, it was not meant for monsieur's weight," he laughed, and putting the breakfast on the ground, contrived to prop the table up.

"There," he exclaimed triumphantly, "now it will serve, but I would advise monsieur not to place it in a draught, it may catch cold."

Guessing that he understood what had happened, I said, "I wished to get a view of the scenery; there is little to look at inside. The Bastille, or at least the prisoner's part of it, is not pretty."

"It is strong, monsieur, and one cannot have everything. Has monsieur learned that the prince was not hurt."

"No," I cried briskly, "tell me all about it."

"There is not much to tell beyond the fact that monsieur missed his aim."

"What! Do you really believe it was I who shot at Condé?"

"Monsieur is certainly very young for such a deed," he replied, shaking his head solemnly, and with this evasive answer he took his departure, bolting and barring the door behind him.

In the evening he returned, but this time I had no word with him, as he was accompanied by the officer of the rounds and several soldiers. The officer gave me a casual glance, searched the cell carefully—though what he expected to find I cannot imagine—shrugged his shoulders, ordered the turnkey to fasten the door, and presently I heard the tramp of their feet along the corridor.

Several weary days dragged by in this manner. The turnkey regularly brought my meals, and sometimes in the morning stayed for a few minutes' gossip, but with this exception I was left alone.

One morning, contrary to the usual custom, he was attended by four soldiers, who stood at attention while I ate my breakfast. As soon as the meal was finished, the gaoler directed me to follow him, and, escorted by the soldiers, I descended the massive staircase shut in on each storey by ponderous double doors, crossed the wide court, ascended another staircase, and so into a large room known as the Council Chamber.

Here four men sat at a table, and one—an ugly, weazened fellow dressed as a councillor—ordered me to stand before them. Then the soldiers retired well out of earshot, and the examination began. First of all the councillor asked a number of questions concerning my age, name, family, and estate, one of his colleagues writing down the answers as I gave them. Then followed a long harangue on the infamy of my crime, after which the speaker implored me to make a full confession, and to throw myself on Condé's mercy.

"Not," he exclaimed, "that we require your confession; these proofs are too clear," and, noticing my start of surprise, added coolly, "listen, and then say if I am not right."

Turning the papers slowly over one by one he read the heads of a mass of evidence which his agents had collected, evidence so clear and convincing that, on hearing it, I almost believed myself guilty. It began by describing me as a penniless lad, who, having come to Paris to seek my fortune, had taken service with Mazarin as a secret agent; and all my doings with the Cardinal were carefully noted down.

For this I was prepared, but the next paragraph brought the blood to my face with a rush. It stated that, having discovered Madame Coutance was a friend of Condé, I had struck up an acquaintanceship with her for the purpose of worming out the secrets of his party.

"That is false!" I cried hotly.

"Softly, my friend, softly!" exclaimed the weazened little councillor, "we will hear your remarks at another time and in another place," and he continued calmly with his reading.

The third stage showed how cleverly the conspirators had laid their plans. Numerous witnesses had met me going towards that part of the town where I was afterwards discovered in hiding, and they all affirmed that I acted as if not wishing to be recognised. This, of course, I could not deny, as many people must have noticed me when chasing the crafty François.

"We are ready to prove these things against you, monsieur, and more also," said the councillor. "For instance, there are the names of two men who saw you take a prominent part in the attack on the carriage and afterwards run away. Now, will you confess?"

"I am innocent, monsieur."

"What an absurdity! Must we then put you to the question?"

"It is needless, monsieur; I am speaking the truth."

"You are obstinate," he exclaimed, screwing up his little eyes, "but a turn or two on the rack will alter that. Come now, will you deny that you are a spy of Mazarin's?"

"Certainly, monsieur. It is true that I am in the Cardinal's service, but I have heard no word from him since he left Paris."

"Are you acquainted with Madame Coutance?"

"Yes, she is a friend of mine."

"Good! I thought we should arrive at the truth. Now, will you explain how you came to be in the house where the soldiers found you?"

"It is a strange story, monsieur, and says little for my sense, but you shall hear it," and I related how cunningly François had lured me into the arms of his fellow-plotters.

"Pah!" exclaimed the councillor, wrinkling up his forehead, "that is a child's invention. You cannot expect us to believe such a tale."

"Still it is true, monsieur."

For nearly an hour longer the councillor continued putting all sorts of questions concerning Mazarin's plans, none of which I could answer. My silence made him very angry, and at last he exclaimed in a passion, "Take him away. I warrant we shall soon find a means of loosing his tongue."

The soldiers formed up and I was marched across the courtyard, where several prisoners who were not confined to their cells assembled to watch me pass. I gazed at them eagerly, but they were all strangers who only regarded me as a prisoner in a far worse plight than themselves.

"Courage, monsieur," whispered the gaoler, as the soldiers turned back from my cell, "we all have our misfortunes."

He spoke in a kindly manner and I looked at him gratefully, for a prisoner has but few friends. Then the door clanged, the bolts were pushed home, and I was left alone to reflect on the councillor's last words. I had heard too much not to understand what he meant by finding a way to loose my tongue, and I instantly began to conjure up all kinds of horrible pictures. However, it was useless going to meet trouble, so I endeavoured to banish the subject from my mind, and to think of my friends, Raoul, Marie, and the Englishman, who were doubtless wondering what had become of me.

CHAPTER XVII.

Free!

On the third night after my visit to the Council Chamber I was awakened from a sound sleep by some one shaking my arm. Looking up and rubbing my eyes, I beheld the gaoler with a lantern in his hand bending over me.

"Rise, monsieur, and dress quickly," said he.

"Who wants me at this time of night?" I asked.

"I do not know, monsieur. I have my orders, and the soldiers are waiting at the foot of the stairs. But courage, monsieur!"

The tone in which the man spoke made me shiver. It was plain that he expected the worst, and I immediately remembered the councillor's threats. My heart beat quickly at the thought of the dreaded torture chamber, and my fingers trembled as I fastened my clothes.

"Am I to be put on the rack?" I asked, but the gaoler, shaking his held slowly, replied that he knew nothing.

"An officer of police brought an order signed by the Governor, but he would answer no questions. If it should be so, confess everything, monsieur. You are very young, and the rack—ah!"

"Thanks, my friend, though I am sorry your advice will not help me. I have already told the truth, and they would not believe it."

"Say what they wish, monsieur! Anything to escape the torture! I have been in the chamber once, and it was horrible for a strong man even to look on. And they are sure to get what they want in the end."

"At all events I will bear up as long as I can!"

"It is useless, monsieur, useless, I assure you," said he, as I finished dressing.

We left the room, and, descending the stairway, found the soldiers drawn up at the bottom.

"Albert de Lalande!" exclaimed their officer, and the next minute I was walking in the midst of my escort to the court, where a carriage stood in waiting.

"Enter, monsieur," said the officer, who himself followed, while the troopers mounted their horses.

I leaned my head against the back of the coach in a state of both wonder and relief. Whatever else happened it seemed that I was not to be taken to the torture chamber. The night was dark, but I could tell that we were leaving the Bastille. Where were we going? I addressed myself to the officer, but received only a curt "Silence!" in reply.

Did they intend to execute me without further trial? It might be so—more than one prisoner had been hurried from the Bastille in the darkness for that purpose. Might was right in those days, and justice stood a poor chance of getting itself heard.

I could not discover in what direction we drove, but the journey was long and apparently roundabout, perhaps in order to avoid attention. The officer sat rigidly upright, with his sword drawn, keeping keen watch and ward as if I had been a most desperate criminal. There was, however, small chance of escape, even if I could overpower my guard. The soldiers rode on each side of the coach, and I should have been cut down instantly.

At last the carriage stopped, the officer opened the door and ordered me to descend. We had halted in front of a large building, which at first I failed to recognise. Several armed men stood on the top-most step.

"At least the place isn't a prison!" I concluded, as the officer hurried me to the entrance and along the corridor, while two of the gentlemen in waiting followed close behind.

Nearly at the end, and on our right hand, was a door hung with rich tapestry. Pushing the curtains aside, the officer knocked softly, and then ushered me into a large apartment furnished in the most sumptuous and magnificent manner.

"Albert de Lalande, your Highness!" he announced, and I looked quickly at the man who stood up to receive me.

This, then, must be the renowned Condé who had restored lustre to the French arms, though

I held that the country had amply repaid the brilliant soldier for his skill and valour. I was also one of those who believed that winning a battle did not place a man above the laws, nor give him the right to ride rough-shod over his fellows. Still, Condé was a brilliant general, and certainly second to none save Turenne; while there were not wanting numerous flatterers who ranked the prince first.

A thin man of average height it was who stood before me; firmly set, well-proportioned and muscular. The Bourbon type was strongly marked in this member of the family—thick lips, large mouth, high and prominent cheek-bones. He possessed a good brow, betokening intelligence, and sharp, keen, blue eyes that pierced through me.

"Why, monsieur the assassin is scarcely more than a boy!" he exclaimed with a sneering laugh.

"I am old enough not to be frightened, even by Louis de Bourbon!" said I, angry at his taunt.

"*Parbleu!* These are brave words from a prisoner of the Bastille! The Governor feeds you too well! But come, I have several questions to put. Why did you try to kill me?"

"I did not try, your Highness! At the time of the attack I was a mile away, shut up in a room and well guarded."

"You seem fond of prison," he said, and I felt that he did not believe a word of my story.

"I had no choice in the matter, your Highness."

Condé looked me straight in the face, and I met his gaze without flinching.

"You look like an honest lad," he exclaimed grudgingly, "but the evidence against you is strong. Come, tell me everything, and I will promise you a pardon beforehand. Was it Mazarin who urged you on?"

"I have not heard from the Cardinal for months, monsieur. If the plot was his work, he did not take me into his confidence. But I think, monsieur, that your enemies are nearer home."

"How? No one in Paris but De Retz would plan such a deed."

"The Abbé is a dangerous enemy, your Highness."

"No," said Condé, looking puzzled, "it could not have been De Retz. He and his henchman, De Lalande—your cousin by the way—were with me five minutes after the pistol was fired. I wish you would trust me."

"You will laugh at my suspicions, and the explanation will not benefit me."

"*Ma foi!* I have learned to consider nothing strange in this citizen squabble. Come, speak as a friend, and I promise on my honour not to repeat your words."

I hardly knew what to do. I had no wish to injure either Henri or Pillot, but on the other hand, my own life was in danger, and finally I resolved to relate the story with as little mention of names as possible.

Condé listened attentively, stopping me now and then to ask some searching question, and evidently considerably puzzled by the whole affair.

"If this be true," said he at last, "it seems that Mazarin had nothing to do with the plot. But there is one point which still requires explanation. If you were not there, how could the mob have followed you to the house?"

"They did not follow me, but were led by two of my enemies."

"Who were they?"

"One was Baron Maubranne dressed as a charcoal-burner, and him I killed."

"Who was the other?"

"M. Peleton, disguised as a mason. He kept out of my way, the coward!"

"*Corbleu!*" exclaimed Condé, laughing, "that showed his discretion. Now, M. de Lalande, I am going to think over this extraordinary story. Meanwhile you must return to the Bastille. It is not exactly a pleasant residence, but it is above all things safe. True, the Governor will keep out your friends, but I will take care that he does not admit your enemies. By the way, who is this M. Beauchamp of whom you have spoken?"

"An officer in the household of the Duke of Orleans."

"Ah, well, I shall be visiting the Luxembourg in a day or two, and I may meet him."

Summoning the officer, who had remained on guard just inside the door, he directed that I should be driven back to the Bastille without delay; and thus my night adventure ended.

It was early morning when we reached the famous prison, but my gaoler received me with a cheerful smile.

"I hope monsieur's journey has proved a pleasant one," said he, for, of course, he had watched the departure of the carriage.

"It has not been amiss," I answered, "and it may help to prove my innocence. At any rate, it was more agreeable than a visit to the torture chamber," and I began to undress.

The interview with Condé had raised my spirits, and I felt more cheerful than at any time since my arrest. Although doubtful at first, he was evidently impressed by my story, and for his own sake would endeavour to unravel the mystery. I had, however, to exercise considerable patience. Another week passed wearily enough, and during the whole of that time no whisper reached me from the outside world. I was left entirely to my imagination, and even Gaston of Orleans could not have changed his mind as many times as I did during that period.

At one moment I felt sure of freedom; the next I listened to the roar of the hungry mob assembled to witness my execution. I turned hot and cold at every sound; now fancying the gaoler was coming to set me at liberty, again that he was bringing news of my condemnation.

One morning after breakfast I was sitting daydreaming as usual, when the door was opened, and the turnkey requested me to finish dressing and follow him.

"What is it now?" I inquired anxiously.

"An order to attend the Council Chamber, monsieur."

"Am I to receive my freedom?"

"I cannot tell, but there are no soldiers below, which is not a bad sign."

I knew my way by now, and followed my gaoler briskly down the staircase to the chamber. The four councillors were there, standing together, and near them was Condé himself.

"Well, M. de Lalande, did you expect to see me again?" he asked.

"I hoped to do so, your Highness."

"Then you do not fear my discoveries? Well, I have inquired into your story, and am inclined to believe you spoke the truth. For one thing, M. Peleton has disappeared."

"Then he has received a warning, your Highness."

"That is possible, as he may know too much. Still, without his evidence I cannot probe to the bottom of this affair. Now I am going to make you a proposal. If I set you at liberty, will you find this M. Peleton and bring him to me? His arrest is necessary, you understand, in order to clear your own character."

"Then I shall be the more anxious to discover him, your Highness."

"Very well; and remember, it must be done without noise or fuss, by yourself and your friends. If my fresh suspicions are correct, he has powerful patrons whom I have no desire to ruffle for the present. So it must be your private affair, and you take all the risks."

"I will do that willingly."

"So I expected," said he, laughing, and at once directed the weazened councillor to make out my paper of discharge. Having fulfilled certain formalities, I was escorted beyond the five gates and set at liberty.

It was strange what an unfamiliar aspect the streets of the city at first bore. I stood for a time perplexed by the change from the gloomy Bastille, bewildered by the noise of the traffic, and scarcely knowing which direction to take. Wandering on aimlessly, I at length found myself on the Quai Henry IV., and, keeping steadily along past the Hotel de Ville, reached the head of the Pont Neuf. Turning off here, I was soon in the familiar net-work of streets near the Palais Royal, and presently entered the Rue des Catonnes.

My landlord, who would hardly have raised an eyebrow in the midst of an earthquake, made no comment on my long absence, but, merely observing that monsieur would perhaps like something to eat, disappeared.

Going to my room, I removed my sword, which had been returned to me on leaving the Bastille, and sat down. In a short time my worthy host brought some food, for which I was really grateful, and I asked cheerfully if any one had called at the house to inquire for me.

"A soldier of the Queen's Guards who comes every evening, monsieur. He is a foreigner, I think, he speaks French so badly."

"Ah, an Englishman, a fine fellow, and my very good friend."

"There is also a young cavalier who comes from the Luxembourg to inquire if you have returned. He it was who informed me that monsieur had gone into the country."

"And they come every evening?"

"Without fail, monsieur."

"Then be sure to send them up the instant they arrive."

About six o'clock, observing Raoul approach the house, I withdrew quickly from the window, so that he might be taken the more completely by surprise. Suddenly the footsteps ceased, and I heard my friend putting his question to the landlord. The answer was not distinguishable, but it produced a remarkable effect. There was a rush and a clatter on the stairs, the door of my room was opened quickly, and Raoul threw himself into my arms.

"Albert," he cried, "I began to fear we should never see you again. You are too venturesome, my dear fellow. Listen! What is that? Ah! here is your English friend, and mine, too, now. He is a splendid fellow."

"Back again, my friend!" cried John Humphreys, as he entered the room. "You have had a long holiday this time."

"Longer than was agreeable," I answered, laughing, "but sit down and tell me the news; I am dying with curiosity."

"So are we," observed Raoul; "we want to know all that has happened to you."

"Didn't the story get abroad?"

"Only a little. We heard you were suspected of leading the attack on Condé. In fact, there were people who swore they saw you fire, though, naturally, I knew that was rubbish."

"Did you guess the truth?"

"Yes, and told Humphreys here. But I have not cried it from the housetops."

"You were wise; it is an affair that requires delicate handling," and I repeated the story of my adventures, from my disappearance to the moment of my being liberated from the Bastille.

"The plot is no mystery to us," said Raoul thoughtfully, "but it will be difficult to prove. We have not the slightest doubt that your cousin Henri fired the pistol."

"Is he still in Paris?" I asked curiously.

"Yes, and goes about quite openly with De Retz."

"Why doesn't Condé arrest him?" asked Humphreys, who was not in the habit of beating about the bush.

"Henri de Lalande has played his game far too cleverly," laughed Raoul, "you may depend that his share in the plot was known only to himself and De Retz."

"But," said I, "the instructions for trapping me must have been given by him."

"There you are wrong. The man François has been examined, and he knows nothing of your cousin. He was employed and paid by Peleton, who was wise enough to mention no names."

"Peleton is an arrant coward, and a traitor to boot."

"Just so," said Raoul, "and were he caught the whole secret would be laid bare. But he has vanished."

"And it is my business to find him; I have promised Condé to do so, though without implicating him, and, besides, I want to clear my own name. Is he likely to have left Paris?"

Raoul went to the door to make sure that no one was listening, and coming back, said quietly, "I will tell you my idea. Everything depends on Peleton, and De Retz is aware that he would betray his dearest friend for a hundred pistoles. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly," said I impatiently, "go on."

"As soon as Condé got on the right track, Peleton disappeared and has not been seen since. Now if he were a free man, he would long before this have made a bargain with Condé in order to preserve his own skin."

"Do you think——" I began in horror, but Raoul interrupted me, saying, "No, no, not as bad as that. I simply mean they are holding him a prisoner till the affair has blown over. De Retz is making a hard fight with Condé, and if the prince is beaten, why, then Peleton can talk as much as he likes. Of course for your own sake you must try to unearth him, and I will help in the search."

"So will I," exclaimed Humphreys, "though I shall be of little use unless it comes to fighting."

"There may be enough and to spare of that," said Raoul, "if Henri de Lalande is the fellow's gaoler. He may be a rogue, but he is a fearless one."

Raoul's theory was, certainly, mere guess-work, but the more we discussed it the more likely it appeared to be correct. Peleton was a tricky fellow, and I understood my cousin too well to believe that he would allow him to be at large.

"If Peleton's hiding-place is to be discovered we must watch Henri," I suggested at length, and the others agreed.

"There is one thing I can do," remarked Raoul. "The Duke of Orleans has command of the gates, and I can request the officers on duty to watch for Peleton. I shall leave Condé's name out, and make it a personal favour."

"Meanwhile Humphreys and I will take a walk in the neighbourhood of Notre Dame. We may possibly meet Henri on his way to visit the Abbé."

"Don't run too far into danger; the Abbé's parishioners are not the most gentle of citizens."

The Englishman laughed lightly, and tapped his sword as if to say, "This will prevent them from being too saucy."

We went down into the street, and Raoul, promising to return the next evening, departed on his errand, while Humphreys and I turned in the direction of the cathedral. The people, as usual, were in a high state of excitement, but we met with no adventure worth relating, and unfortunately saw nothing of my cousin.

"Never mind," said Humphreys, "the luck doesn't always come at the first throw."

Next morning I paid a hurried visit to the Rue Crillon, where I received a warm greeting from the ladies, who had already heard of my release.

"At first the prince thought you were guilty," exclaimed Madame Coutance. "It was stupid of him, but then, appearances were against you."

"They certainly were," said I, "and even now there are people who imagine I had a share in the plot."

"Not those in high quarters. They know the truth, but cannot prove it. By the way, had you come last night you would have met your cousin."

"It is so long since I saw him that he is quite a stranger. Did he inquire for me?"

"Yes," replied Marie, "and he was delighted to learn that you were free of the Bastille. At least, he said so," and she looked at me with a meaning smile.

It was apparent that both Marie and her aunt guessed the truth, but the subject was a delicate one, and they did not dwell on it; only, as I was leaving, Madame Coutance whispered, "Do not forget that the street as well as the Bastille has its dangers."

"Thank you for the warning," I answered, "but I shall be more wary in future."

The rest of the day I spent in prowling about the city, in asking questions here and there, and in watching sharply for either Pillot or my cousin, but the search proved fruitless, and towards the end of the afternoon I returned to my rooms, jaded and weary.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Fight on the Staircase.

About seven o'clock in the evening John Humphreys, who was just off duty, joined me, and shortly afterwards Raoul arrived.

"No news?" cried the latter, noticing my gloomy looks. "Well, there is no need to despair. I

have so arranged that Peleton will find it difficult to slip through the gates, and I have heard something of your cousin. Young D'Arçy met him last evening in the Rue de Roi."

"Then he has taken up his old quarters in La Boule d'Or and hidden Peleton there!" I exclaimed; but Raoul shook his head.

"Condé's troopers have searched the house by now, and no doubt a watch is set. Still, we might walk that way."

"Have you told Armand the story?"

"Yes, he can be trusted; and he has a host of acquaintances."

"Very well, let us go down to the Rue de Roi;" then, turning to Humphreys, I remarked, "we may have need of our swords to-night."

We had only just turned the corner of the street, when Raoul exclaimed, "Why, there is D'Arçy! Armand, here is an old friend who will be glad to see you."

"De Lalande! So they have let you out of the Bastille? Condé made a mistake. He should have kept you behind the bars till the trouble is at an end. You will soon be running into fresh mischief. Where are you going now?"

"On a voyage of discovery," said Raoul. "Will you come?"

"Gladly! The times are out of joint, and I have nothing to do."

I introduced him to Humphreys, and we went on together to the Rue de Roi. Leaving us at the corner, to watch, Raoul crossed the road and boldly entered the famous inn. The street was crowded with people, and, lest some chance passer-by might recognise me, I muffled my face, and leaned against the wall, while Armand and John Humphreys stood a short distance off.

Raoul was absent a long time, and we began to fidget, but presently he came out and made his way toward us.

"We are on a false scent," he said; "our quarry has not been there, though Henri has. Condé's troopers have searched the house twice in three days, and the landlord is quite indignant. But I believe the rascal knows something about Peleton."

Armand was on the point of answering when I caught sight of a figure which induced me to draw my companions back where they would not be noticed. It was Pillot in a tremendous hurry. He had been running fast: his hair and face were wet with perspiration; he was breathing irregularly, and kept glancing over his shoulder as if expecting to discover an enemy. Stopping outside the inn, he looked anxiously up the street, was apparently reassured, and then darted like an eel up the side entrance.

"The Abbé's man," said D'Arçy; "the poor fellow our friend here half murdered."

Raoul became excited. "A messenger either to or from Henri de Lalande!" he exclaimed, and was about to dart across the road when I pulled him back roughly, saying, "Be still! You will spoil everything. Let us stay here and follow when he returns."

"Good advice!" agreed D'Arçy. "We may learn something. Hola! What an uproar! Something serious the matter one would imagine. Here comes D'Artagnan with his musketeers! The fellow rides as if Paris belongs to him. See how he sweeps the *canaille* out of his path!"

"The crowd is closing up," said Humphreys, "and the musketeers will have hard work to force a way. Ah! there's one fellow down. D'Artagnan is a fine rider. See how he manages his horse! He would have done good work in our ranks at Naseby. And a sworder, too! There's a stroke!"

"Smother him!" laughed D'Arçy; "we shall have the rabble here in a minute. Be quiet, my dear fellow; I warrant D'Artagnan is no better fencer than yourself."

"Hang D'Artagnan!" cried Raoul excitedly. "Look, there goes the little man."

"And a man in a gray cloak behind him! Is that Peleton?"

"No," said I, "it is my cousin. Quick, let us follow and see where they go."

While the squabble progressed in the narrow street, and the air was filled with threats and cries of terror, while steel rang against steel, and from more than one quarter came the sounds of firing, we ran swiftly in the wake of my cousin and his henchman. Pillot surprised us by the rapidity of his movements. Though so short of stature he ran at a tremendous pace, and had the man in the gray cloak been able to keep pace with him, we must soon have been thrown off. As it was, we kept the second of the fugitives well in view; and so the chase continued almost without a stop, save when Pillot halted from motives of prudence.

The noise of the strife behind us died away; we were in a labyrinth of narrow streets, and had

need of caution, though Humphreys suggested overtaking my cousin, and forcing him at the point of the sword to speak.

"No, no," I exclaimed, panting, "that will never do. A fight here would bring the people out in hundreds. Besides, my cousin is no coward, and we should obtain nothing from him by force."

So we ran on, maintaining the interval between us and the gray mantle, till at length Pillot stopped for his master, while Armand d'Arçy, plucking my sleeve, whispered, "Do you know where we are?"

"Yes," I answered quietly, "I recognise the street. Higher up on the other side is the house of Martin the astrologer. We shall discover something now. Unless I am very greatly mistaken we are close to Peleton's hiding-place."

"Your cousin is an artful rascal, Albert. Just notice how unconcernedly he walks along. No one would imagine he was in any danger. Ah! They are crossing the road! *Corbleu!* you were right—they are going to Martin's."

"Follow me one at a time, and without making a sound," I said, softly. "Keep close to the wall, and well out of sight. What an old fox Martin is! I thought Mazarin had taught him a lesson."

Hiding in a doorway below the astrologer's house we awaited events. It was evident that Pillot had not fetched his master for nothing, and Raoul, who stood next to me, whispered, "They have scented danger of some sort, either to Henri or to Peleton."

"Peleton is shut up in that house somewhere, take my word for it," I answered quietly. "Look!"

Drawing a whistle from beneath his mantle, Henri blew sharply, and almost immediately the window was thrown up. We could not hear the conversation, but presently the man inside closed the window, and a few minutes later the door was opened. Then Henri said something in a whisper to Pillot and entered. The little man waited till his master had disappeared, gave a last glance at the house, and turned, as we supposed, to come down the street.

"Let him pass," whispered Raoul, "then spring on him from behind and clap a mantle over his head. We must not let him call for help."

"Be as gentle as possible; he is a plucky fellow, and I am a long way in his debt. Don't forget that he saved my life."

To our surprise, however, Pillot did not get farther than the next house, when he stopped, and began to unlock the door. This unexpected manoeuvre held us in amazement, but Raoul, who had no intention to be thus baulked of his prey, acted promptly. Bounding from his hiding-place, he reached the door almost at one leap, and his hands closed like a vice round Pillot's neck. The next instant we were all in the passage, and D'Arçy closed the door.

"Now," exclaimed Raoul, loosening his grip, "if you raise your voice you are a dead man. Do you understand?"

"'Tredame!" spluttered the dwarf, rubbing his neck, "monsieur explains himself well. He speaks to the point and leaves no room for mistakes. But perhaps monsieur will tell me the reason for this unexpected visit. My poor house is not often honoured by such company!"

"The wheel has turned again, Pillot; nothing more," I laughed. "We want to see M. Peleton, who is a very dear friend of ours."

"Is it you, monsieur? It would have been better for us had I left you to Maubranne's mercy. As to M. Peleton, how should I know anything of him? He disappeared after that affair with Condé."

"Be sensible, Pillot, the game is against you. We are four; you are one, and in our power. Accept your defeat like a man, and wait till the wheel brings you on top again. Peleton is in this house or the next, and we intend to find him. Come, there is no time to waste."

"Monsieur is so pressing one cannot refuse him," said he, and led the way along the passage, with Raoul's pistol at his head by way of reminder.

"We must have a light," D'Arçy declared; "there is no fun in visiting our friends in the dark."

"There is a lighted candle in the room on our left," remarked Pillot, and, with Raoul still guarding him, he went to fetch it.

We were now at the bottom of the stairs, and I suggested that Armand and Humphreys should stay there as a kind of rear-guard.

"A good plan!" said Raoul. "Should this fellow attempt to escape run your sword through him. Now, my man, lead on, and remember you will pay dearly for mistakes."

I had rarely known my comrade so firm, so energetic and determined: this was a phase of his

character not often shown. Pillot shrugged his shoulders carelessly and led the way. Up we went through the silent house, past many empty rooms, till our guide came to a halt on the topmost storey.

"Our dear Peleton likes to be high up," said he with a grin; "it is so quiet and pleasant. By this time most likely he has gone to bed; he keeps good hours. Perhaps monsieur will unlock the door while I hold the candle," and he handed Raoul a key.

Stooping down, my comrade endeavoured to insert the key, but there was evidently something amiss.

"Monsieur has not the knack," said Pillot. "Shall I try?"

"I believe you have given me the wrong key, you rascal."

"Oh, surely not, monsieur! I could not have been so stupid. Let me see it. No, it is the proper key, monsieur. See," and taking the key from Raoul, he asked him to hold the light.

In passing from one to the other the candle by some means dropped to the ground and the light was extinguished, leaving us in darkness.

"Do not move, monsieur; it is close to your foot. Now I have it! Ah, you have kicked it away. What a misfortune!"

We could hear the rascal groping about for a time; then all was still, and he made no reply to our calling. Raoul was furious, and threatened to kill the fellow, when he caught him, a clause very needful to add.

"He has tricked us!" said Raoul, searching for the candle, though with small hope of finding it.

To my astonishment, for I thought Pillot too sharp to leave it behind, the candle lay unbroken not a yard from my feet, and a light soon showed that our guide had disappeared. It was very annoying to be duped in this way, but I could not help laughing at Pillot's craftiness.

"He won't try to get past Armand and Humphreys," said Raoul; "he will hide away in one of the empty rooms."

Suddenly some words spoken by Mazarin months before came into my mind, and I began to rail at my folly.

"Raoul," I cried, "unless we get Peleton out quickly it will be too late. There is a means of communication between the two houses, and Pillot has gone for assistance."

"Peleton isn't likely to be in here," growled Raoul.

"Why not? Pillot would have given you the right key if the room was empty. Anyway we will find out," and taking a run I dashed myself against the door.

Raoul followed, and then we went at it together. Once, twice, thrice. The last time it showed signs of yielding—presently with a crash it burst open.

"Come on," I cried, seizing the candle which I had placed upright against the wall. "Can you see anyone?"

"No," answered Raoul, "but there is a bed in the corner. Bring the candle."

We ran across the room quickly, and there, fully dressed, but with his arms bound, lay Peleton. His face was ghastly white, and he shook with fear.

"Get up," I cried sharply—there was no leisure for ceremony—"do you hear?"

"What do you want with me?" he whined, for, with all his bluster, the fellow had no more pluck than a pigeon.

"To carry you to Condé—dead or alive—you can take your choice. If you listen to my advice, you will come peaceably. I will go first, Raoul; you come behind and keep a sharp eye on our friend."

"And I will use a sharp sword if he doesn't mind himself," said Raoul.

Now I shall always believe that as soon as his first fright had passed, Peleton was rather pleased than otherwise to accompany us. His information would be worth much to Condé, and I have no doubt he expected to drive a very good bargain. He did not attempt the least resistance, nor did he endeavour to lag behind as I hurried him from the room.

We had reached the head of the stairs when I drew a sharp breath, and Raoul uttered a cry of anger. The scene was lit up by the flare of torches, and Pillot's shrill laugh came floating up to us. At the same moment we heard Henri's mocking voice, and there, sword in hand, stood my cousin,

barring our path. Below him were several brawny ruffians, bearing pikes and clubs, and, last of all, Pillot, who shouted with good-humoured banter, "Aha! the wheel has turned again, monsieur!"

Henri affected to treat the matter as a joke, saying, "Chut! Albert, did you not know Peleton was my guest? I cannot allow him to leave at this hour! The night air is not good for him. Return to your room, M. Peleton, my cousin will accept your excuses."

"A truce to this farce," I cried. "Will you let us pass peacefully?"

"Certainly. You can come down, but I cannot part with M. Peleton just yet. I enjoy his society too much."

"We shall not leave without Peleton," I cried.

"Then you will not go at all. I am sorry, there is no help for it."

He kept his temper admirably, but none the less I felt that if we were to get past, it would be by force of arms, so, raising my voice, I called to Armand and Humphreys who were still keeping guard at the foot of the stairs. In an instant they came bounding up, and Henri, polite to the last, exclaimed, "As you will, cousin, but remember I am not to blame."

The next instant we were in the thick of the fight. By the accident of position Raoul was opposed to Henri; Pillot, with three companions, disputed the way with our friends below, while three others rushed fiercely at me. One, advancing too hurriedly, ran himself on the point of my sword, but the others pressed their assault so savagely that I had much ado to preserve my head from being battered in.

Once during the mêlée my foot slipped, and I was brought to my knees. A short, thick-set man, whom I dimly recognised as Pierre, stood over me with his club raised for striking. I saw him swing the weapon round so as to deliver a sturdier blow, when, with a howl of pain he let the club fall.

"Jump up, De Lalande! Where's our man? Ah, there he is! Get him between us and we will make a rush for it."

The speaker was John Humphreys, who had gallantly fought his way to my side, and was now keeping a clear space with his sword. Peleton stood just above us, shivering with fear, and I must admit that his position was far from pleasant. His arms were still bound, so that he could not ward off a blow, and one brawny ruffian was making desperate efforts to reach him.

Suddenly there arose a terrible cry, sending a thrill of fear to our hearts. The staircase was on fire! Armand called to us to descend quickly; Pillot screamed to his master. My assailants, thoroughly cowed, beat a hasty retreat, Raoul and Henri alone, undisturbed by the cries, continued the deadly fight.

"Run, Humphreys," I cried, "and do not let this fellow slip away when he reaches the bottom."

The Englishman nodded, and dashed off, while I turned to Peleton.

"Come," I said, "or you will be burned to death," but he stood like a statue. He seemed numbed by fear and unable to move a step, until I shook him roughly. Then he roused himself and let me lead him.

As we came abreast of my cousin, I saw him fall, wounded, but could not go to his help. Peleton's nerves had broken down, and without me to lean on he must have stumbled. The flames took a firmer hold, the heat became intense, the smoke was suffocating. I called Raoul by name; he answered cheerily, bidding me not to lose Peleton.

One man, quickly followed by a second, sprang past me and hurried to the top of the staircase. It was Pillot with a trusty comrade, and the dwarf, recognising me, shouted some directions, which, unfortunately, I failed to understand. The smoke filled my nostrils, I began to suffocate, but staggered on blindly, dragging Peleton with me. Below us the stairs had begun to burn—soon they would fall with a crash.

And where was Raoul? Why was my gallant friend not by my side? Had Pillot slain his master's enemy in the confusion? I endeavoured to call again, but only a dull, choking sound came from my throat. The horror of the situation gave me superhuman strength. I dragged Peleton from step to step, caring nothing for smoke or flames; if the fire scorched my feet I felt no pain.

Suddenly two figures sprang toward me; they were Armand and John Humphreys, and together we hurried Peleton into one of the lower rooms which the flames had not reached.

"Attend to him," I cried, "don't let him escape," and ran swiftly to the staircase, but Armand was as quick as I, and as I mounted the first step he pulled me back.

"Where are you going?" he demanded, and his tone was stern and peremptory.

"To seek for Raoul. Quick, let me go, or I shall be too late."

In reply he tightened his hold on my arm, exclaiming, "It is utterly useless, Albert, the staircase will be down in a few seconds, you will only throw your life away."

I begged and prayed him to release me, but he clung the more strenuously for my appeals, till at last I struggled like a madman to get loose. The steadfast fellow, however, kept his grip, and I could not fling him off.

In the very midst of the struggle came the sound of a terrific crash, and a broad tongue of flame leaped up to the roof of the building. Then Armand freed my arms; against my will he had saved me from a terrible death—the staircase had fallen in bodily.

"Poor Raoul!" exclaimed my companion sorrowfully, but the lump in my throat prevented me from making any reply. I could only stand and stare at the burning débris which formed the funeral pile of my gallant comrade.

CHAPTER XIX.

I Lose all Trace of Henri.

By this time the flames had attracted a number of people, who ran from all directions to gaze at the spectacle. Armand brought me back to my senses by saying, "We must make sure of Peleton, Albert, or he will escape."

"Humphreys will guard him while you fetch a coach," I said, "then drive him straight to Condé."

"And you?"

"I shall stay here till—till——"

"I understand. We will escort this fellow to the Hotel de Condé, and then return."

My passion had exhausted itself by now; I could only stand bewailing the loss of my trusty friend. Meanwhile the crowd increased; soldiers appeared on the scene; men dashed buckets of water on the fire; some seized burning pieces of wood and flung them into the street where they could do no more mischief.

I toiled with the rest, and gradually we got the flames under, but there was no sign of Raoul's body. One man we found was quite dead, and no one recognised him. What had become of the others? Some had dashed down the stairway in front of me, but I had left Raoul and Henri, Pillot and his companion, nearly at the top. Where were they, if not buried beneath the smouldering débris of the fallen staircase?

Presently a roar of excitement came from the people behind me, and glancing towards the astrologer's house I beheld a man, hatless, bleeding, and scorched by the hungry flames, rush into the street.

A hubbub of voices at once arose.

"Bravo, monsieur!"

"That's one who was in the house!"

"He has saved one man's life!"

"See, his face is cut!"

At sight of him my heart for a moment stood still; then I called aloud "Raoul!" and, scattering the people right and left, ran, frantic with joy, toward the friend I had never again expected to meet alive.

"Raoul!" I cried, "Raoul! Where have you been? I thought you were in the burning house!"

"There was your cousin to save," he answered simply, flushing like a girl.

"You risked your life to save his?"

"Pshaw! I could not leave him to die like a rat. Then Pillot came with one of his fellows and we carried him through the secret passage into the next house."

"Is he seriously hurt?"

"I am afraid so; though Pillot calls his wound a scratch. But what of Peleton? Has he escaped?"

"No! He is safe in the Hotel de Condé by now. D'Arçy and Humphreys took him there in a coach. But come, let us get away from this crowd, and visit the surgeon in the Rue Pierre. It is quite time your wounds were attended to."

"It is scarcely worth the trouble; I can have that done at the Luxembourg."

However, I managed to persuade him, and the surgeon, a man whom I had met more than once at the Palais Royal, bathed his wounds, applied some ointment, and lent him a hat. He was a wise man and asked no questions, though no doubt he learned in the morning all that he wished to know.

Leaving the house we walked to the end of the street, when Raoul stopped, saying, "You had better not go any farther with me; Condé will be expecting you."

"To-morrow will do," I replied, and we were still discussing the point when Armand and the Englishman suddenly made their appearance.

I need not describe their joyful surprise on perceiving Raoul, whom both believed to be dead. John Humphreys did not make a great display of his feelings—he rarely did—but Armand clapped Raoul on the shoulder and executed a lively dance.

"Where is Peleton?" I asked, when he had sobered down.

"In the Bastille by now, I expect. Condé is delighted; he will learn all about the plot within twenty-four hours. I never saw such a coward as Peleton!"

"The fellow isn't worth powder!" exclaimed Humphreys in disgust.

"Anyhow there is an end to De Retz's scheming," I remarked cheerfully, but Raoul shook his head.

"The Abbé can take care of himself," said he; "you will find that Peleton has no proof against him. It is your cousin who will suffer."

"I thought Henri was killed on the staircase'" cried Armand.

"No, he was wounded, but we managed to convey him along a secret passage, of which Pillot knew, into Martin's house. He is a bold rascal! I shall feel quite sorry if he falls into Condé's clutches. Did the prince question you, Armand?"

"No, he was too much occupied with Peleton, but he intends sending for Albert in a day or two. You will be wearing his livery soon, my friend!" said he, turning to me.

"Not likely!" I replied laughing. "Remember I am still a *Mazarin*!"

Humphreys and I accompanied our friends some distance on their way, and then turned off in the direction of the Palais Royal. We did not talk much, for I was tired and sleepy, but I thanked the Englishman for the gallant part he had played in Peleton's capture. Indeed, without his assistance I question if the adventure would have ended so successfully.

Remembering Armand's remarks, I remained in the house the whole of the next day, in case Condé should send a message; but it was not until the third evening after the fight that one of his gentlemen appeared with a request that I would go immediately to the Hôtel de Condé. The prince received me graciously, and, indeed, he displayed a very winning manner when it suited his purpose.

"Well, M. de Lalande," he exclaimed, "you have kept your promise, and Monsieur Peleton is occupying your old cell in the Bastille. Do you know, I fancy he is rather pleased at leaving his late quarters?"

"I can well believe that, your Highness! He does not like being on the losing side. But I hope he has made it quite plain that I had nothing to do with the conspiracy?"

"He has told me everything in his power. By the way, De Lalande, that cousin of yours must be a very daring fellow!"

"My cousin Henri, your Highness?" said I, with a start of surprise.

"Yes, the man who carried the plot through! De Retz has an able lieutenant in him. Oh, come, do not look so astonished. You must have guessed the truth, and now there is no need for concealment. Peleton's evidence is sufficient to bring your cousin's head to the block. But I bear him no ill-will, and he can still save himself."

"How, your Highness?"

"You are a clever lad," said the prince, "and honest, as far as honesty goes in these days. You are from the country, I believe?"

"Yes, your Highness," I answered, really surprised now.

"And have enjoyed many a good day's fishing, I warrant? Ah, I see you have. Have you ever gone out with the determination to hook one particularly big fish?"

"Why, yes," I replied, laughing, and quite at my ease. "I remember an old trout, a regular monster, that I could never catch, though I tried often enough. He was a wily fellow and would not take the bait."

"But you landed others?"

"A good many, your Highness, though they did not make up for the one I missed."

"Then you can understand my feelings, De Lalande. I have been angling a long time for a very wily fish, but I cannot get him on my hook; and the lesser ones are not worth catching. They are useful only as bait."

Now I began to perceive the prince's drift. The big fish was, of course, De Retz, who so skilfully avoided capture; Peleton only ranked as one of the smaller fry.

After a time, Condé, who had been watching my face closely, spoke more plainly.

"M. de Lalande," he began, "I am going to ask you a question. Will you take service with me?"

"You do me great honour, your Highness, but it is impossible. I have pledged my word to Cardinal Mazarin."

"His power is gone."

"Which seems to me all the more reason why I should stand by him, your Highness. A fallen man has the most need of friends."

"And obtains few. However, I will not attempt to persuade you, but there is one matter in which it may suit your interest to serve us. Would you like to see your cousin led out to execution?"

"By no means, your Highness! He played me a nasty trick, 'tis true, but I am sure he had no hand in Maubranne's scheme."

"Very well. I will speak plainly to you. This Peleton has told me all he knows. His confession is sufficient to bring your cousin to the block, but it is not enough for my purpose. It strikes at the second man and leaves the first untouched. Now, I would much prefer that it should be the other way, and in this you can assist me."

"I will enter into no schemes to entrap my cousin, your Highness."

"No, no!" answered the prince pettishly; "you mistake my meaning. I want you to go to him from me, privately. Make him aware that Peleton has confessed and his own head is in danger. Do you understand?"

"So far, your Highness."

"The rest is simple. He can save his life if he chooses, by adding to Peleton's confession. If he will not do this he must take the consequences."

"Your Highness has made a mistake," I answered coldly. "Henri de Lalande is not another Peleton. He will not purchase his life on these terms."

Condé laughed and exclaimed, "At least you can offer him the chance. Find out where he is hiding and deliver my message. Then he can please himself."

Although feeling sure that Henri would refuse to avail himself of Condé's offer, I allowed myself to be persuaded, and, before leaving the house, agreed to report to my cousin what the prince had said.

I soon discovered that the promise was easier to make than to fulfil. Henri had vanished, and on all hands I heard rumour of his death. So steady and persistent was the report that even Marie and her aunt, on whom I called the next day, believed it.

"It is quite true," Madame Coutance declared. "De Retz has offered up prayers for the repose of his soul, which he would hardly venture to do if he believed your cousin was still alive. I met Madame de Chevreuse last night and she informed me that the Abbé is disconsolate."

I did not argue the point, though in my own mind I concluded that De Retz was a very clever

schemer, and that these reports of Henri's death were circulated in order to deceive Condé.

In the afternoon I paid a visit to the astrologer's house, and by dint of bribing the porter gained admittance. Fortunately for the learned Martin the fire had not reached his rooms, though some parts of the buildings were damaged. The philosopher received me very affably, and spoke in feeling terms of my cousin's illness, but when I asked if Henri would see me the wily old fellow regarded me with the utmost astonishment.

"M. de Lalande is not here!" he observed. "Did you not know? How strange! Why, he had left before D'Artagnan arrived with his musketeers to search the house. It appears that your cousin has offended Condé, or the Duke of Orleans, or some powerful person, and is in danger of being imprisoned."

"It is said in the city that he is dead."

"Dead? I hope not, but in his weak state the hurried flight may easily have proved fatal. The soldiers were sent to arrest him, but his faithful servant, by some means, heard of their coming, and smuggled his master out just in time."

"Pillot?"

"Yes, he is a trusty fellow."

"Where was my cousin taken?"

"Pillot did not trust me with his secret," said the astrologer, smiling blandly, "and I have not seen him since."

"But you can guess where he is to be found?"

"Indeed, I have not the least notion, monsieur," and the bland smile became still more bland, "but as to the rumour of your cousin's death I would fain hope that it is not true."

Remembering the nature of my last visit with Mazarin to this house, I placed small faith in Martin's remarks, but as it was clearly impossible to obtain any further information I took my leave, resolving to discover for myself what really had become of Henri. Raoul joined me in the search, but for a long time our efforts were fruitless. It became, indeed, difficult not to believe in my cousin's death. Many even of Condé's friends accepted the report as true, while the Abbé's henchmen openly mourned the loss of their brilliant leader. Still I was not entirely satisfied, especially as no trace could be found of Pillot.

During one of our expeditions we came across Pierre and François, the one grim and hostile, the other smiling and communicative.

"Monsieur is right," replied François in answer to my questioning, "M. de Lalande did leave the astrologer's house; I helped to carry him. He was ill—dying, I think. We took him to a safe place. Pillot stayed to nurse him and I left them. He instructed me to go because the soldiers were watching."

"Could you show us this house?" I asked.

"Monsieur would have his journey in vain. M. de Lalande is not there now. Pillot took him, or his dead body, away in a carriage."

"Where is Pillot now?"

"Ah! monsieur asks a question! Perhaps he is dead too! I have not seen him since."

For a moderate consideration François agreed to point out the haunts which his former ally had been in the habit of frequenting. Such dens of vice and misery, where crime, starvation, and disease went hand in hand, I had never beheld. I wondered how any one could live in such noisome places even for a day. The sufferings of the people were terrible; a dreadful pestilence mowed them down in scores. Small marvel that a clever agitator like De Retz could obtain hundreds of willing tools ready for any act of bloodshed and violence.

Always hungry, always in filth and rags, scarred and disfigured by disease, their numbers decimated many times over by an ever-present plague, what could they know of the sanctity of life? Death walked and talked with them continually; a familiar guest, eating and drinking by their side like a trusty comrade—feared by none, welcomed by many. But for François we should never have left these dens alive.

With all our care and trouble we could obtain no information. My cousin had vanished so completely that I gradually became convinced of his death, and an accidental meeting with De Retz confirmed me in this belief.

Coming one day from the neighbourhood of Notre Dame, I met the Abbé face to face. He stopped involuntarily and his face became white.

"De Lalande?" he gasped. "De Lalande? Is it possible?"

"Albert de Lalande," I said.

"Ah," he exclaimed with a sigh of relief, "Henri's cousin! I had forgotten you, and it is a shock to one's nerves to meet a dead man in the flesh."

"Is my cousin really dead, monsieur?"

"*Ma foi!* What a question! Why do you ask?"

"Because I imagined the report had been spread about to deceive Condé."

"No," he replied, showing no offence at my remark, "I would it were so, but M. Beauchamp's sword bit deeply. Pillot should have informed you, but he has had much to do. He has taken his master's body home for burial. I feel his loss greatly. Your cousin was an admirable man, and I shall never find his equal. But what of yourself? Have you taken service with Condé?"

"No, monsieur, I still fight for the Throne."

"And for Albert de Lalande! Well, well, as long as you steer clear of me I wish you no harm."

"Monsieur is pleased to be gracious," I returned with a mocking bow. "I am indeed grateful."

The little rogue's eyes twinkled brightly, and he went away laughing.

So Henri was really dead and laid to rest in the family vault! I could no longer question the truth of the rumour after seeing the Abbé's face when he met me. It was certain that he, at least, believed my cousin was dead and buried. Even Raoul could not shake me on this point, though he rather scoffed at the story.

"It is a trick to deceive Condé," he said. "If Henri is dead, where is Pillot?"

"He has taken the body home."

"Chut! The tale is a pack of lies. The Abbé is keeping your cousin in hiding till Condé has lost his power. Have you heard that he is going to accuse the prince of high treason?"

"De Retz?"

"Yes, to-morrow in open court at the Palais de Justice. There are likely to be warm doings, and it is my belief if De Retz wins your cousin Henri will soon come to life."

That night I wandered about the city by myself. Raoul and Armand were with the troops in the Luxembourg; John Humphreys was at his post in the Palais Royal; the gates of both palaces were closed and barred, for no one knew what an hour would bring forth. The night passed quietly, but, as soon as the dawn broke, bands of armed men, in the pay of De Retz, moved down on the Palais de Justice, swarming into the halls and galleries and seizing the best positions. The crowd outside rapidly increased to enormous numbers, and very soon cries of "Down with Condé" were heard.

About an hour after De Retz put in an appearance loud shouts announced the coming of the prince. He rode haughtily at the head of some two thousand fighting men, who marched afoot with their hands on their swords, and apparently quite ready to use them. I was standing near the gate as Condé passed, and to my surprise he beckoned me toward him.

"Has your search failed?" he asked.

"Yes, your Highness. According to all accounts my cousin is dead, and I am sure De Retz thinks so."

"Why do you say that?" he asked quickly. "Come with me; it is important that I should have the latest news."

Accordingly we walked together along the corridor, which was filled with armed men, and so into the Parliament Hall, Condé listening with deep attention to the story of my chance meeting with De Retz.

"Ah!" he exclaimed thoughtfully, "that will account for more than one strange incident," and leaving me he took his seat in the assembly.

I was too far off to hear the speeches, but there was tremendous excitement, and I think everyone was expecting the meeting to end in bloodshed. Better sense, however, prevailed; Condé sent a nobleman to ask his friends to withdraw, and De Retz went with a similar message to his own retainers. Then something happened which threatened to undo all the good. Condé's messenger getting back first shut the door, and when the Abbé knocked, opened it only a little way. As De Retz endeavoured to squeeze through, the nobleman caught and fixed him between the two halves, at the same time calling to his friends to kill the Abbé.

"The nobleman caught and fixed him."

"The nobleman caught and fixed him."

It was a critical moment, as the first blow would have been the signal for a fierce fight, yet I could hardly refrain from laughing at the spectacle. The little man's head and shoulders were within the hall, and the rest of his body was outside, while he could not stir an inch. Happily no blow was struck, as one of Condé's captains, crying "Shame!" ran forward, and two or three of us nearest the door managed to extricate the Abbé from his awkward situation.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he exclaimed; "I am glad there are some men of honour in the prince's train," and he passed to his seat as if nothing unusual had happened.

"There will be no more trouble to-day," said a man close to me; and he was right, but Paris had only just missed another revolution.

CHAPTER XX.

News at Last.

The incident at the Palais de Justice somewhat sobered the Parisians, and for several days the city presented quite an unusual appearance of peace. Once more the mob retired to its own quarters, and the nobles of the different parties renewed their private friendships.

By this time I had abandoned my search for Henri, and spent most of my time with Raoul and Armand d'Arçy, or with John Humphreys.

One evening while chatting with the Englishman at the Palais Royal, Le Tellier, the Under Minister, passed by.

"Are you not M. de Lalande?" he asked, turning and looking hard into my face.

Now, coming from him, this was a very stupid question, as, when Mazarin ruled in Paris, Le Tellier had often seen me with the Cardinal. However, I shrugged my shoulders, and answered carelessly that he made no mistake.

"I believe you are in the Queen's service?" he continued.

"It is an office without salary, then," I answered, thinking of my nearly empty purse, which was not likely to wear out through the rubbing of coins against it.

"Tut, tut!" he exclaimed, "money is not plentiful at Court just now; nevertheless you will be amply rewarded. Come with me, I have a word for you," and he led me aside.

Wondering at his manner, but glad of a chance to do something, I waited for him to speak.

"You are aware," he began, "that, in two days from this, the King is to be declared of age, and that he will proceed in state to the Parliament House?"

"Certainly, monsieur, that is common talk; the citizens are very pleased."

"Those who are peacefully disposed!" he exclaimed; then, sinking his voice to a whisper, he added, "but there are some still eager for mischief. It would be a pity if a tumult should arise during the King's progress. The soldiers, fortunately, can be depended on, but in addition, we require a band of gallant gentlemen to line the route. Can I rely on you for one?"

"Assuredly," I replied, "I shall be glad to assist."

"Then come to me at midnight to-morrow, and I will inform you where to station yourself."

"Another adventure?" inquired Humphreys, when I returned to him.

"Pouf! A bagatelle, nothing more! Le Tellier is anxious that I should have a good view of the procession. You will accompany the Queen, I suppose?"

"The orders have not yet been issued. It is a good idea this of declaring the King of age; though he is only a youngster."

"Fourteen," I said. "It is understood that his mother will continue to rule as before."

"Just so. But in the King's name. Don't you see that it will cut the ground from under the feet of her enemies? While they would plot against the Regent, they will not dare to raise arms against the King. I call it a very sensible proceeding. People will have to choose sides now, either with the King or with his foes. If Condé and De Retz do not submit, they will be rebels. They must either obey or defy the King, and we shall have a plain issue."

"It will keep Mazarin out, though."

"Quite so. If I were you I should obtain a post under the young King."

This was sensible advice, but considering myself still in Mazarin's employ, I decided to let the matter wait a while longer. Perhaps I might even yet hear from Belloc.

On the morning of the eventful day I took my place, by Le Tellier's orders, about a hundred yards from the gates of the Palais de Justice. Other cavaliers, well armed, were stationed at short intervals along the line of route, making little show, but ready at any moment to pounce on any one endeavouring to stir up strife.

As it chanced, Le Tellier's precautions were not required. There was a tremendous crowd, but the people were in the best of humour, and amused themselves by shouting "*Vive le Roi!*" with all their might. They cheered for the Queen-Mother as well, and, listening to them, one would have thought Paris the most loyal city under the sun.

"*Ma foi!*" exclaimed the cavalier on my right, "it is wonderful; but how long will it last?"

"Till the show is over most likely. The citizens love a pretty spectacle, no matter who provides it."

Round after round of cheering announced the approach of the procession, which was on the most magnificent scale. After a body of trumpeters came fifty guides clothed in the Royal livery, and then eight hundred gorgeously dressed nobles on horseback.

I felt a passing pang of envy at sight of the nobleman who led the Light Horse. His robe was of gold embroidery, and he carried his sword in a baldrick of pearls. In his hat waved a splendid plume of feathers, and the trappings of his white horse were of scarlet adorned with pearls. The spectators could not contain themselves, but clapped their hands and cried "Bravo!" vigorously.

After the Light Horse came the Hundred Swiss in their romantic costume, and then a crowd of gentlemen, followed by the marshals of France—one carrying the King's sword, with the scabbard resting on his arm. Then a thundering roar broke out, and the people appeared beside themselves with delight.

"Live the King!" they cried. "God bless him!" "God save his Majesty!"

I craned my neck as eagerly as any other sightseer, as our youthful monarch approached. He

was truly a handsome boy, and managed his fiery horse with the grace and skill of an accomplished rider.

"What a King he will be!" exclaimed one bystander. "He will bring back the glory to our country. *Vive le Roi! Vive le Roi!*" and again there was an outburst of cheering.

No one paid any attention to the princes and nobles following him; all the cheers were for the King and the King alone.

I observed Raoul ride by, and presently John Humphreys appeared with the guards who surrounded the Queen's carriage. Raoul was smiling, for, like a true Parisian, he enjoyed a pretty show, but the Englishman strode along as if he had a mind to be done with the business. Just as he was on a level with me I received a great surprise. On the other side of the road a little man had pushed himself right into the front line of spectators, and was gazing anxiously up and down as if expecting to recognise some one.

"Why, surely," I said, half aloud, "that is my old acquaintance, Pillot!" and, looking a second time I became sure of it.

The dwarf seemed ill at ease, and altogether unlike his usual self. His face, too, was white and pinched, as if he had been suffering from a severe illness.

"*Parbleu!*" I muttered, "one would not think he had but just returned from the country! Perhaps he missed the air of Paris! Anyhow, I am glad he is back, as now I shall learn the truth as to my cousin's death. When the procession is gone by I will beckon to him to come over."

At that moment Pillot caught sight of me; he became more nervous than before, and to my astonishment instantly began edging back into the crowd till he was lost to view. Now this curious behaviour set me thinking. Why should Pillot endeavour to get out of my way? Was he afraid that I should hand him over to Condé? Certainly he had been mixed up in the plot, but so had Pierre and François, and the prince had not thought it worth while to imprison either of them.

"There is some mystery about this which I must look into!" I muttered. "Pillot is not the man to slink away without reason."

For the time, however, I could do nothing, but as soon as the King returned to the Palais Royal I began an eager but unavailing search for the dwarf. He had disappeared completely, and there was no trace of him anywhere.

In the evening Raoul and John Humphreys met at my rooms and I informed them of my discovery. The Englishman thought little of it, saying Pillot was likely to keep out of my way, but Raoul, like myself, fancied he had some reason for his strange behaviour.

"The fellow isn't afraid for himself," he declared. "He knows Condé will not touch him, and besides, he is a plucky rascal. Depend on it, there is something beneath this business, and I should guess it has to do with Henri de Lalande."

"But my cousin is dead and buried!" I objected.

"Chut! You have no proof of it. He may be in hiding for what we know, and waiting his opportunity. According to all accounts, he will soon have little to fear from Condé."

"The prince is lost," exclaimed Humphreys. "Did you notice he stayed away to-day? It is rumoured in the palace that the Queen is furious, and that there is to be no more giving quarter. Condé will be an outlaw before long."

"And it is my belief," remarked Raoul, "that when Condé goes, Henri will reappear. Still, if you wish, Albert, we will help you to find Pillot."

"The worst of it is I have not the faintest idea where to look."

"We can try the house in the Rue de Roi."

"The walk will do us good," said Humphreys, "and I am off duty till midnight;" so, putting on our hats, we went into the street.

Paris was holding high holiday that evening. The buildings were decorated with flags and streamers; bonfires cast a lurid light on the animated scene; crowds of people went to and fro, laughing merrily and cheering the nobles and ladies who rode by in their gorgeous carriages. The spell of the morning was on them all; and though many realised that the troubles would soon break out more fiercely than ever, every one seemed bent on making the most of the brief truce.

"You Parisians are a remarkable set!" exclaimed Humphreys as we walked along; "I believe you would dance on the edge of a mine."

"Till the explosion occurred!" laughed Raoul. "Did you notice the folks in that carriage, Albert? One was your friend Lautrec; he still follows Condé's fortunes. Ah! there goes Marshal

Turenne!"

"A fine general!" remarked Humphreys. "Why doesn't the Queen give him the command of the army? He would make short work of Condé."

"Wait till the prince draws the sword," said Raoul, "and we shall see. Have you forgotten that at present we are all friends?"

The Englishman declared it was scarcely worth remembering, as, in a day or two, we were just as likely to be enemies, and I thought there was a considerable amount of truth in his remark.

We wandered along slowly, chatting together, but scanning the faces of the passers-by and keeping a sharp look-out for Pillot. There was, however, no sign of him, and I had just suggested going straight to the inn, when Raoul, suddenly taking a man by the arm, exclaimed, "François? How lucky! Why, you are just the fellow we want!" and turning round I saw that he was addressing the amiable spy of the Rue Crillon.

François gazed at us with a beaming smile. He was not a bad-hearted fellow, and bore no malice in spite of all that had passed.

"Where are your friends?" asked Raoul. "You should not be alone on such a night as this. Where have you left Pillot?"

"Pillot?" echoed François wonderingly. "I have not seen him for weeks; he is in the country somewhere."

"Oh, now, François, you are making fun of us! We know that our friend Pillot is in Paris."

"Monsieur is wiser than I, then!" replied François. "They say, down in our quarter, that he went to bury his master and has not returned. I assure monsieur that not one of his old friends has set eyes on him for a long time past."

The man spoke so straightforwardly that even Raoul believed he was telling the truth, though it seemed strange, if Pillot were really back again, that none of his acquaintances should be aware of it. Why had he kept himself hidden all this time?

"We want to find him," said Raoul after a pause, "but not to do him any injury. Suppose he has returned to Paris—if he ever went away—where is he most likely to be? I assure you, François, that he has nothing to fear from us."

"I cannot tell, monsieur. I think you must have made a mistake. If he were inside the walls I should have seen him. He has not been back to any of his usual haunts."

Evidently there was no information to be obtained from François, so Raoul gave him some money and let him go.

"Perhaps the fellow was right in saying you had made a mistake," remarked Humphreys, but this I would not admit. Not only had I seen Pillot, but he had recognised me.

"Let us try at La Boule d'Or," Raoul suggested, "and, if that is useless, we will not bother any further. After all, it really is of small consequence one way or the other."

The famous inn was crowded as usual, but Raoul conducted us to a private room, where, in a few minutes, we were joined by the landlord. He remembered me immediately, and began to speak of the trick I had played on the dwarf.

"We have come to meet Pillot," interrupted Raoul playing a bold game; "tell him we are here."

"But, monsieur, it is impossible! He is not in my house. He has been here only once since monsieur tied him up. It would not be a safe place for him. Besides, I have heard that he is no longer in Paris. Monsieur can search the place himself if he wishes. At the present, the inn is empty of guests. Two friends of the prince have been staying here, but they departed yesterday."

"And all your rooms are free?"

"That is so. Monsieur is at liberty to search the house."

"Come," said Raoul to us, "we are not likely to discover anything, but we shall feel more satisfied perhaps."

Taking a candle the landlord led the way, and we tramped after him, searching every room. Raoul knew the house thoroughly, so that nothing escaped us, and we were bound to admit that Pillot was not in the inn. Leaving us outside, Raoul entered the public rooms, but he could neither find the dwarf nor gain any information of him, and at last we departed, my comrades feeling more than half inclined to believe that my eyes had deceived me.

However, as Raoul said, I should gain little even by finding Pillot. If my cousin still lived—

which I sincerely hoped—he could not be in much danger from Condé. Beneath all the gaiety and merriment of that night, it was easy to observe the shadow of coming trouble, and, indeed, before many days had passed Paris was again in a state of turmoil.

Condé was almost openly in rebellion: the country trembled on the brink of civil war; of authority there was none save in the strong hand; every man did that which seemed right in his own eyes. Bands of armed ruffians paraded the streets, robbing and murdering as they pleased; the soldiers quarrelled among themselves; the nobles fought in the public places, unsheathing their swords even in the Parliament House. Thoroughly wearied of this meaningless strife, I longed for a strong man, such as our present most gracious King has proved, who should whip these snarling dogs back to their kennels.

One evening I sat at my window looking into the street below. The inhabitants of the Rue des Catonnes were having fine doings. From one end to the other they swarmed—a heaving mass of excited humanity. It was plain that a crisis had arrived. Paris was in rebellion, but against whom or what not one in a thousand knew or cared. For the moment the people were masters, and they made the most of their opportunity.

I watched their antics in amazement. Costly furniture, handsome brocades, rich tapestry and gorgeous hangings littered the street. Grimy, unwashed ruffians swaggered about in clothes costly with lace, and plumed hats, some even carrying swords. They were in the merriest humour imaginable, but I knew well that a chance word might change their mirth into madness.

"They have plundered some nobleman's house," I muttered. "I wonder who the victim is?"

I was still sitting at the window when the tramp of horses' feet sounded in the distance, and presently D'Artagnan appeared at the end of the street with a body of cavalry. For a minute or two it seemed as if the rioters would oppose his progress, but, having no leader, and perhaps being in no mood for a fight, they began to slink away by ones and twos into the houses. A few lingered half defiantly, but obtaining no support from their fellows, they also disappeared, and not a blow was struck as the soldiers rode through the street.

"Bravo!" I exclaimed, "the mischief may be stamped out yet. I wonder if the other quarters are quiet," and, buckling on my sword, I crossed the room just as a man in dishevelled dress rushed panting up the stairs.

I gazed at my unexpected visitor in amazement and rubbed my eyes. Were they playing me false? No! It was Pillot sure enough, and he was gasping for breath. Why had he come to me?

"Just in time, monsieur," he stammered as he leaned against the wall to recover.

"What is it?" I exclaimed. "What do you want? Quick, I am in a hurry."

"Wait, monsieur. Listen; you must! I ran all the way to the Rue Crillon, but you were not there."

"The Rue Crillon?" I interrupted, thinking of Madame Coutance and Marie. "Is anything the matter there? Are the ladies in danger?"

"No, no," he answered impatiently. "No one will harm them. They are as safe as at Aunay. It is of your cousin. He calls for you, monsieur; he is dying—and alone! Come with me, monsieur, quick! I must return at once; he may be dead!"

"A truce to this mummery," I said sternly. "What new trick is this? Do you imagine I am to be trapped a second time? My cousin is dead and buried; the Abbé himself told me."

Pillot gazed at me in blank despair. His face was white, his lips twitched nervously, his words came with a sob.

"It is false, monsieur, false. I deceived the Abbé as I deceived all for my master's sake. I spread about the story of his death; I tricked De Retz because he could not be trusted. To save his own life he would have thrown your cousin to the wolves. It is each for himself, nowadays, monsieur. I wormed out their plots: they could not deceive Pillot. De Retz is a clever schemer, but the biggest rogues make mistakes. He believed my tale, and so did Condé. Only one man besides myself and M. de Lalande knew the truth, and I was obliged to trust him. As to your cousin I have guarded him against all comers; I have nursed him day and night; I have tricked the soldiers, but now the end is come. Prince and priest are welcome to the secret now."

"But what do you wish me to do?" I asked suspiciously.

"To soothe your cousin's last moments, monsieur; to close his eyes in death. He calls for you always."

If Pillot was playing a part, he was indeed a superb actor. Yet still I hesitated, so intense was the distrust with which in these days each regarded his neighbour.

"Do you doubt me, monsieur?" he asked. "Do I plead for the dying in vain? This is no trick. Why should I deceive you? We have been on opposite sides, but we have played the game fairly. I

have even gone out of my way to serve you. It was I who sent the note warning you against our own trap."

"And saved my life after I had blundered into it!"

The dwarf watched my face as if his own life depended on my decision.

"Pillot," I said at length, "I will trust you. But, if you deceive me, so surely as you stand there I will run you through with my sword."

"Monsieur is welcome in any case," he answered, "if only he will come at once."

CHAPTER XXI

The Death of Henri.

Many a time I had left the house in the Rue des Catonnes with a very doubtful chance of returning, but I had rarely gone out with such a pressing sense of danger as now. Pillot's sudden appearance, his strange story, and the memory of former deceptions wrought on my nerves, and I almost wished Raoul or John Humphreys was with me.

The rioters, too, now that the soldiers had departed, returned to the street in a very quarrelsome humour. They stood in groups talking angrily; and one brawny ruffian, yelling "Death to the Nobles!" struck at me with a pike. Happily my sword was free and I pinked his arm; still it would have gone hard with me but for Pillot, who procured us a passage by the use of some jargon well-known to these night-birds.

"Be cautious, monsieur," he said, "the mob is growing dangerous. The riot has not spread far, but to-morrow——!"

"Will the city rise?"

"Nothing can stop it, monsieur. These people are like wild animals. You can excite them to a certain pitch, but beyond that——"

"What is the grievance now?" I asked, and Pillot shrugged his shoulders.

"There are many things, monsieur, but at present the chief is hunger. The inhabitants of these quarters are half starved, and they want to know why. They will put the question very loudly in a day or two."

"Will they rise against the throne?"

"It all depends. A whim or a word will do it. Some one will cry 'Down with Condé!' and there is your revolution ready-made. The man who is starving does not stop to reason. The cry may be 'Down with the Nobles!'—no one knows as yet, and no one cares."

Presently I asked why he had ventured abroad on the day when the King was declared of age.

"My master was better then," he said, "and desired to learn how affairs were shaping. We heard a rumour that Condé would not be present; so I went to find out. It was a risky thing, and the sight of you frightened me."

"It need not have done; I wish my cousin no harm."

"True, monsieur, but we were not aware of that."

"Where have you hidden your master?"

"In an outhouse at La Boule d'Or. We dared not take him to the inn; he would have been discovered. I was afraid the other evening when you came with M. Beauchamp."

"Then you saw us?"

"I watched you enter, monsieur—and go away," and the rascal could not help chuckling.

Through dirty courts and fetid alleys where the sun never shone, my guide led the way, bringing me at last to the familiar Rue de Roi. My distrust had vanished by now, and I followed him unhesitatingly. Crossing the road and walking rapidly through a private passage, we reached the back of the inn. The yard was in partial darkness, but I made out an old building which communicated by a covered way with the hostelry. Lighting a candle, Pillot entered this passage and stood listening intently. No sound could be heard; all was silent as the grave.

"Too late!" he exclaimed sadly, and, heedless of me, sprang up the stairs two at a time, the flame of the candle flickering violently. I heard him turn the handle of the door, and, running up quickly, passed in with him.

The evening shadows were relieved only by the glimmer of the candle, but I gave no more than a passing glance at the wretched room. Somehow I had felt convinced almost from the first that Pillot was telling the truth, and now the proof was before me.

The dwarf, who had placed the candle on the table, was bending over a figure close by. It was my cousin, wrapped in an old dressing-gown and seated in a deep arm-chair. He looked wasted and white, his mouth was drawn at the corners, his eyes burned deep in their sockets with a red glow, I could almost see through the thin white hands that lay loosely on his lap.

Pillot, as I have mentioned, bent over him, and called softly, "Monsieur, monsieur, your cousin has come; I have fetched your cousin."

"Henri!" I cried—for the dying man apparently took no notice—"I am your cousin, your cousin Albert. Do you not wish to speak to me?"

There was a faint gleam of recognition in his eyes, and it appeared as if he were trying to brace himself; then he extended one hand, and said quietly, "Albert!"

I urged him to let me send for a skilful surgeon, but he shook his head impatiently, saying, "No, no, he could do nothing. Pillot has been my doctor and nurse. Good little man!"

One could perceive that he was dying, and I would not disturb him further, though the dwarf wished to carry him to his bed.

Presently he looked at me with a faint smile whispering, "The elder branch will lead again. It is well; you are a better De Lalande than I. At one time I hoped we might have been friends, but you had chosen your part."

"We can be friends yet."

"No, no; it is too late. What I have done I have done; but there is one matter pressing on my mind. Will you forgive me for—for——"

"The plot?" I put in cheerfully. "Of course, I forgive you freely; it was all in the game."

"You did not believe I meant to kill you?"

"Not for an instant," I answered honestly.

He lay back in his chair, and a gratified smile flickered across his face.

"Maubranne did not tell me," he said feebly. "He knew I would not—not consent. I only intended to keep you shut up for a few weeks. What have you done with Peleton?"

"He is in the Bastille! He informed Condé of all that he knew."

"Pah! I warned the Abbé against him, but he refused to listen. Tell Raoul not to worry about me. I should have recovered but for the soldiers. Pillot had to move me. It was horrible, but the end is near now. Ask the Abbé to bury me in Paris."

He stopped exhausted; his eyes closed; his head fell forward, and I thought that life was gone. Pillot stood near me choking back his sobs. I had not given him credit for such feeling.

"Oh, monsieur," he whispered, "your cousin was good to me; I would have given my life freely to save his!"

"Hush! He is speaking again!"

Very low and faint were the words, but we heard him say, "Pillot, are you there? Good little man, I will not forget. Fetch my cousin, Pillot. Quick, do you hear? Ah, *monsieur le prince*, you are too late! It is a pity!" and he laughed derisively.

There was silence for a time, and then I whispered softly, "Henri!" but he made no answer.

The feeble light played on his face, half hiding, half revealing the ghastliness of it; and we, without speech or movement, stood watching him, till the candle sputtering out left us in darkness. Pillot would have fetched another from the inn, but he feared to stir lest the sound should disturb the dying man. How long we remained thus I cannot tell, but shortly before morning broke there came a strange, convulsive rattle from the huddled figure in the chair, and we knew that Henri de Lalande had passed from the power of man.

"May his soul rest in peace!" said Pillot simply.

"Amen," I replied, and, moving softly, closed the dead man's eyes.

I was scarcely more than a lad then, and Henri's melancholy death in this wretched room made a deep impression on me. It was a sad ending to what might have been a brilliant career. The early dawn, creeping into the room, cast fantastic shadows everywhere, and the light falling on my cousin's face imparted to it a strange appearance of life. I could almost have thought he was smiling at me.

"I have lost a good master," said Pillot. "You and he were not the best of friends, monsieur, but there are many worse men in Paris than the one who has just died."

"I am sure of it," said I somewhat absently, for my thoughts had turned to the previous night's rioting.

"The King is dead; live the King!" What a world of meaning lies in those simple words! I was really sorry for my cousin's death, but there was no leisure to indulge in grief; the living were in need of my assistance.

Paris was up in arms! The mob had already broken loose, and, unless the ruffians were quickly checked, no one could foretell how the tumult might end. As yet only a house or two had been plundered, but within twenty-four hours Paris might be reduced to ashes. I thought of Marie and her aunt, and determined by some means to get them from the city. It seemed pitiful to leave my cousin lying dead there, but I could do him no good, and Pillot would carry his message to De Retz.

"Pillot," I exclaimed, "I must leave you to attend to your master's burial. The Abbé will not refuse his last request. I would stay, but it is necessary for me to attend the ladies in the Rue Crillon. If the mob rises there may be danger."

"You are right, monsieur! Paris is no place for them at present. Take them out of it as quickly as possible. As to your cousin, I will see that he has proper burial; I will go to De Retz at once."

"What will you do afterwards? You will not care to serve the Abbé again?"

"Ah, no! I would wring his neck with pleasure, monsieur!"

"I do not wish that. Come, let me make you an offer. I am not rich like my cousin, but if you will take service with me, I will arrange that you are properly paid."

"After all that has passed? Monsieur is exceedingly trustful."

"Because I am aware how loyal you have been to M. de Lalande."

"Very well, monsieur; let it be so. You will find that I shall serve you faithfully."

"I am sure of that. Now listen. As soon as my cousin is buried, start for Aunay—you know the road. If you do not find me there I shall have gone to join the Cardinal and you can follow. Here is some money; you will need it before we meet again."

As soon as these matters were arranged we went out, and Pillot carefully secured the door. The morning had broken cold and gray, a drizzling rain fell, the streets were deserted; the night-owls, wearied by their exertions, had returned to their roosts.

"There is still time to see Raoul," I muttered; so, bidding Pillot go straight to the Abbé, I turned off in the direction of the Luxembourg.

At the Palace the change from the stillness of the city was startling. The gates were closed and guarded; soldiers, fully equipped, stood at their posts; the courtyard was filled with nobles in a state of excitement. Happily for my purpose Raoul observed me and came to the gate.

"What has alarmed you so down here?" I inquired. "Is the Duke afraid of a siege?"

"Have you not heard the news? Come inside where we can talk. It has all happened just as we reckoned it would. Condé has thrown off the mask and broken with the Court. It is rumoured that Spain has offered him a body of troops, and that he intends to tempt fortune in a Civil War. The Queen is firm and does not mean to let him back out; it is do or die for him now."

"All the better; we shall be able to distinguish friends from enemies. It will be an awful thing, but once Condé is well beaten the country will stand a chance of peace. The Duke of Orleans will join forces with the Queen?"

"I cannot say," answered Raoul shamefacedly; "he is pulled this way and that, by both parties. Most probably he will wait to find how things go."

"Then he is a coward as well as a traitor! *Faugh!* I wonder you have patience to stay with him! I can understand a loyalist and even a rebel, but a weather-cock like the Duke is beyond me. Why does he not come boldly into the open? This twisting and turning will do him no good. One would imagine he was a hunted hare."

"There is no need to ask what you will do?"

"Not a bit, I shall join the royal army and serve as a trooper, if no better berth offers. Thank goodness the field is clear now, and we shall know where we stand. But first I must get Marie and her aunt out of the city. Paris will not be safe for them when the mob rises, as it is sure to do. But I have some further news; my cousin is dead."

"I thought you said he died weeks ago."

"Pillot spread that rumour about, but there can be no mistake now, as I have just come from his deathbed," and, while my friend listened attentively, I related the strange story of the past night.

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Raoul; "we were never very friendly, but I am sorry for him. He would have made a name for himself in time. He must have had some good points for Pillot to stick to him so closely. The little man will be lost without his master."

"He has taken service with me."

"I have no doubt he will serve you well. Shall you go to the Rue Crillon at once?"

"Yes, and endeavour to induce Madame Coutance to leave before the danger becomes pressing. Well, I must be off, and I wish you were coming with me."

"I shall follow you," he said resolutely, "and fight for the Crown, with or without the consent of the Duke."

"Bravo, old friend!" I cried impetuously. "Condé against De Retz or Orleans I can understand; but Condé against the Throne is another matter. The point of every honest man's sword should be turned against a traitor! Why not come now?"

"Because the Duke may yet take the field for the Queen! He must make up his mind in a few days at the most."

He walked with me to the gate, and after a brief farewell I set out towards the city. Thus far nothing unusual had occurred, but there were numerous signs of a coming storm. Most of the shops remained closed, door and windows were barricaded, sober Black Mantles, armed from head to foot, stood in groups talking of the situation. The denizens of the courts still rested, but some, more energetic than their neighbours, made furtive excursions into the main streets. They slunk along with pike and club, as if even now half doubtful of their own strength, though here and there a self-appointed leader shouted for death to the nobles. But the time was not yet. The appetite of the *canaille* was not sufficiently whetted; later they would be ready for the feast.

Walking quickly to the Rue Crillon, I found the ladies breakfasting, and was glad to join them, as I had eaten nothing for many hours. They were not aware of the previous night's riot, and Madame Coutance laughed at the idea of leaving the city.

"There is no danger," she declared, "and, besides, I have business in Paris."

"But your friends are gone," I urged. "You have heard that Condé has turned traitor?"

She flushed angrily, and answered in her masterful way, "I know the prince has taken up arms to secure his rights."

"In any case he is not here to protect you from the fury of the mob."

"Bah!" said she scornfully, "a pack of cowards! Any one—a woman even—could send them flying with a riding-whip!"

Argument was thrown away on her, but I did my best, even exaggerating the danger, and begging her to depart if only for the sake of her niece. However, she remained obstinate; not, I think, out of mere bravado, but because she misjudged the strength of the rising. Standing at the window, she pointed to the quiet street, saying triumphantly, "Where is the danger, M. de Lalande? The Rue Crillon looks to me as peaceful as the park at Aunay. Besides, the citizens are in favour of the prince, and they will not injure us."

Shrugging my shoulders impatiently, I made no reply; she must bear the consequence of her folly. Even Marie seemed to think lightly of the peril, though she thanked me prettily for my thoughtfulness. At last, annoyed by my failure, I bade them farewell, and returning to the Luxembourg despatched a soldier in search of Raoul, who looked surprised at seeing me again.

"The woman is an imbecile," he exclaimed angrily, "but we must save her in spite of herself, if it is at all possible. Are you aware that the gates are guarded, and that no one is allowed to pass without a permit? The Duke has just issued the order."

"In that case I may as well abandon the idea of getting them through, unless you can obtain a permit for us."

"I will try, if you will wait here a few minutes," and off he went to the palace.

"Another plot, De Lalande?" cried a laughing voice at my elbow, and, turning my head, I perceived Armand d'Arçy, who had just come up.

"Only an attempt to get Madame Coutance and her niece out of the city. I am afraid there will be mischief in a day or two."

"Sooner than that, my friend! The pikes are being sharpened and the *canaille* will be all armed by nightfall. I suppose you have heard the news of Condé?"

"That he has shown his true colours? Yes! it is the best thing that could have happened. Of course you are for the Crown and against Condé?"

"I am for the Duke of Orleans," said he.

"What, against the King?"

"Against the world, if it comes to that! I chose him as my patron and must stand by him, though I hope he will not assist Condé."

"If he does you will be a rebel."

"All right," cried he, with his merry laugh, "there will be small novelty in that. Ah! here comes Beauchamp, looking as solemn as an owl. Can you not manage to screw out a smile, Raoul? A glimpse of yourself in a glass just now would frighten you to death. Look a bit lively, there is plenty of time for being miserable."

"Brulé has arrived with his report," said Raoul, "and things are even worse than we expected; the barricades will be up to-night. Here, Albert, take care of this," and he gave me an order signed by the Duke: "Allow bearer and two friends to pass the gate of St. Denis without question or delay."

"Thanks," said I, slipping it into my pocket, "it may mean all the difference between life and death, though whether Madame Coutance will leave is more than I can tell. And now, good-bye, for the second time; I am going to my rooms for a few minutes, and after that to the Rue Crillon."

"Avoid the short cuts," D'Arçy advised; "or you may get into trouble, and if you are invited to cry 'Down with the King!' shout with all your might. Better to use your breath unpleasantly than to lose it altogether."

"It is as likely to be 'Down with Condé!' as anything else," I answered laughing, "and in that case you will hear my voice at the Luxembourg."

"By the way," said Raoul, "have you seen John Humphreys?"

"No, I must spare five minutes for him. It is only a hop, skip, and jump from my place to the Palais Royal," and, with their good wishes ringing in my ears, I set off for the Rue des Catonnes.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Mob Rises.

"Ah! it is monsieur!" and my landlord came from his room, where he had evidently been watching for me. "A note from the Palais Royal, monsieur! The messenger has called three times; it is of importance."

"From the Palais Royal? Let me see it. Ah! what a nuisance. Well, I must attend to it; meanwhile, get me a coarse blue woollen overall and a workman's cap. My finery and plumed hat are likely to cause trouble."

"They shall be at once obtained, monsieur," said he without a trace of surprise.

"Good!" and I turned back, glancing again at the paper as I walked.

"Come to me at once. Le Tellier." That was all! What was in the wind now? The under-minister had kept me waiting long enough, and sought my service just when I required leisure for other matters. If Le Tellier's business did not fit in with my own it must wait, as I had resolved on saving Marie and her aunt at all costs.

Inside the gates John Humphreys met me. He was in good humour, and delighted that Condé had at last thrown down the gauntlet.

"It is a straight fight now," said he; "the sort of thing I understand. It is rumoured that the

Queen will leave Paris, and the guards will escort her. Have you a berth in the King's household yet?"

"No, I am still unattached, but Le Tellier has just sent for me; so there is no knowing what may happen. By the way, I have seen my cousin," and I related briefly the story of his illness and death.

"Bravo, Pillot!" exclaimed Humphreys when I had finished; "he's a plucky rascal, and loyal, too. What will become of him now that his master is dead?"

"He has agreed to take service with me. But I must go; Le Tellier has been waiting for some time," and I proceeded quickly to the under-minister's apartment.

"At last, M. de Lalande," rather irritably. "I began to wonder if you had left Paris! Are you still willing to do the King a service?"

"I shall be delighted, monsieur."

"Humph!" said he, making a wry face, "I am not so sure of that. I intend to send you on a dangerous errand. You will need a keen eye, sharp brain, and, as likely as not, a strong arm. My last messenger was waylaid and nearly killed, and you may fare even worse."

"The prospect is not over pleasant," I answered laughing, "but I may have better luck."

"I hope you will," said he doubtfully, "but it is a risky venture. You know that Cardinal Mazarin is at Bruhl, near Cologne? Well, it is necessary to take him an important paper."

"There seems small risk in that!"

"There you are wrong. It is well understood that letters pass to and fro, and his enemies are on the watch. It may be they will learn your secret before you get outside the gates. Their spies are everywhere; even, I may say, in the Palace itself. Now, will you undertake the commission?"

"Certainly, but I cannot travel on foot."

"There are horses in France, I suppose."

"One cannot buy them without money, which so far, has never been plentiful with me."

"Oh," said he, "I will attend to that. The King cannot afford to be niggardly in this matter, eh?" and without even making a wry face he gave me a liberal supply of money.

"Now," he continued, when I had replaced my purse, "this is a serious affair, and the Court will depend not only on your courage but on your skill. Mazarin must receive that letter, and no one else must see it. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, monsieur."

"You will leave Paris to-night; trust no one, and remember that every man you meet on the road may be a spy in Condé's pay."

"Then the chief danger is to be expected from the prince?"

"From every one," he exclaimed sharply. "King's friends. Queen's friends, *Frondeurs* and *petits maîtres* are all to be suspected until that letter is placed in Mazarin's own hands."

Being a very tiny packet it was hidden without much difficulty, and, after listening to Le Tellier's cautions all over again, I left the apartment. Humphreys was waiting in the courtyard, but, staying only to whisper, "Secret service," I hurried on to my own rooms.

"Monsieur will find his things on the bed," said the landlord; "they are rather shabby, but they will attract less notice than new ones."

I asked if the town was quiet, and with a shrug, of his shoulders he said, "As yet, but there will be mischief presently. Monsieur is wise to put on an overall if he wishes to walk abroad."

"I am going to look on, nothing more. Now bring me something to eat, and I will pay your bill."

"I am obliged," said he as coolly as if it were an everyday incident, though I am sure he must have felt surprised at such an unexpected stroke of luck. I know I was astonished at my own ability to pay him.

"Monsieur will return?" said he questioningly, when at last I was ready to depart.

"I trust so. Keep the rooms for me."

He took the money, opened the door, and bowed low as I went out. He had always treated me well, and I was glad to have the means of settling my debt to him.

A considerable change had taken place in the streets since the morning, and there were numerous signs of the threatening storm. The Black Mantles had disappeared, having shut themselves up in their barricaded houses. Brawny men, half-naked and unwashed, patrolled the roadway, mostly in two and threes, but here and there in larger groups. Every one had a weapon, pike or club, axe or chopper, while a certain proportion carried horse-pistols, or blunderbusses.

I pushed on quickly through the crowd to the Rue Crillon, feeling more alarmed at every step, as the promenaders were rapidly getting ripe for mischief. Thus far I believe they had no settled purpose beyond general plunder, but no one could tell what might happen at any moment. I ought really to have gone on with Le Tellier's note, but I could not make up my mind to abandon the ladies. Most of their friends had followed Condé, Raoul could not leave the Luxembourg, and they were practically alone in Paris.

When I reached the Rue Crillon it was nearly empty, and I managed to pass unobserved into my friends' house. Marie and her aunt were sitting in an upstairs room that faced the street. Madame Coutance was looking out with an expression of scorn, but the girl's face was pale and apprehensive. At first they failed to recognise me in my workman's disguise, but after a second or two the elder lady exclaimed, "Why surely it is M. de Lalande, our cavalier, the knight-errant who goes about rescuing distressed dames. But why this mummery, my trusty knight? What does it mean?"

"That I intend doing my utmost to save your life, madame. Come, before the mob begins to work mischief. Raoul has procured me a permit which will pass us through the gates."

"You have grown wondrous timid of a sudden," she laughed. "I can perceive no sign of danger. There are a few people in the street, but they are quiet enough."

"They are swarming from their dens in all quarters of the town, madame, and they are as likely as not to come here."

"But why should they?" she inquired, and I could only reply by asking why they should not.

"They cannot wish to injure us," exclaimed Marie; "we have done them no harm!" a remark which showed how little the girl understood the passions of an angry mob.

For ten minutes or more I stood there begging Madame Coutance to escape, and all the while the number of people in the street steadily increased. They had done no mischief as yet, but passed their time in an aimless sort of promenade, shouting, singing, and mocking at any well-dressed passer-by. Once the whole crowd for some reason swept into the adjoining street, and for a brief period the Rue Crillon was left empty.

"Your bogey has vanished, Albert," cried Madame Coutance in triumph; "I told you there was no danger."

"I trust madame will prove the surer prophet, but I am still doubtful."

"Here they come again!" cried Marie. "What a horrid din! What are they doing, Albert?"

"Singing, but I cannot distinguish the words. They are growing more restless now. I should like to see D'Artagnan ride up with his troopers; he would soon clear the road. But I expect there is sufficient work for him in other parts."

For a while we stood, half hidden by the heavy curtains, watching the antics of the crowd, and wondering what would happen next. The people moved to and fro like caged animals, walking a few steps and turning back or crossing repeatedly from one side of the road to the other. A body of soldiers would have dispersed them easily, as they had neither purpose nor leader.

Presently they began to cluster more thickly at a spot some twenty yards below our house, and then I saw a big ragged fellow holding aloft a red flag, while another was pointing to it, and talking violently. I could not hear what he said, but every now and then the crowd shouted approval of his words.

"The fellow is hatching trouble," I muttered to myself, and, almost unconsciously, I felt for Le Tellier's note.

"They will attack the Palais Royal," said Madame Coutance. "They are angry because the prince has been driven away. I am sorry for the Queen, but they will not hurt her, if she promises to recall him."

"Be still!" I exclaimed with more freedom than politeness, "and listen. Now, can you understand?"

It had come at last. Chance or fate had given the mob a cry, which was all they needed. They were bent on plunder and violence, and any excuse was good enough. Low, deep, and stern, like the early rumblings of a volcano, the cry sounded; then the volume swelled, became clearer and more piercing, till at last in one stupendous roar it shook the place.

"Down with Condé! Down with Condé!"

Marie shivered and gave a gasp of terror, but her aunt still smiled scornfully; she was really an amazing woman.

"What imbeciles!" she exclaimed; "they do not know who is their best friend."

"Nor care," said I, "they intend being their own friends this evening. Stay there a moment while I see to things downstairs."

"Do not venture into the street, Albert," cried Marie, "you will be killed," and I promised to take no risks.

Collecting the servants, who were half dead through fright, I set them to work barricading the lower part of the house, and as soon as they had done all that was possible, I ran again up the stairs to the room which the ladies still occupied. By now the street was packed, and more than one dwelling house had been broken open. Out went costly furniture to be smashed into fragments by the howling rioters, and, "Down with Condé! Death to the friends of Condé!" echoed and re-echoed on all sides.

The mob moved nearer, and attacked the house on the opposite side of the street. Crash went the door, and the people rushed in with cries of triumph. We saw them appear in a room on a level with our own; the window was flung open, and a beautiful statue was hurled on to the pavement below. Down came rich hangings, costly pictures and gilded mirrors; the small articles only were stolen, the others were hacked and chopped and trampled to pieces underfoot.

"Madame," said I firmly, "you must delay no longer. For your niece's sake, if not for your own, you must attempt to escape."

A loud howl added force to my advice, and a dozen stalwart hands banged at our frail barricade. It could not resist long, and what chance would there be for us, when the rioters had swept it away?

"Down with the house! Burn it! Burn it! Have them out! Friends of Condé to the death! Room there for Pierre's club! Bravo, Pierre!"

"Madame," I cried passionately, "listen to reason. Do you want this innocent girl killed before your eyes? These wild beasts will have no mercy."

"It is too late," she answered calmly, "and we both come from a race that knows how to die."

"It is not too late; there is still a chance. Get some clothes from the servants, and disguise yourselves; we can slip out at the back."

Even then I believe she would have stood her ground, but for Marie's evident terror. The poor girl could not conceal her dismay, and her eyes distended in fright as the hungry roar of the mob leaped from the street. Those in front hacked at the barrier: those behind urged on their fellows with deep-mouthed baying.

"In! In! Set it on fire! Death to Condé's friends!" they roared.

"Go!" said I sternly, pushing Madame Coutance out of the room, "and I pray that this poor girl's death is not laid to your account."

The terrified servants had already fled, but madame found some garments, in which the two dressed. I waited for them on the stairs, and my blood ran cold at the yells of the ravenous pack below. Crash! Crash! The barrier was yielding! A few more stout blows and they would be upon us. A second, aye, even half a second might mean the difference to us between life and death.

"Quick! Quick!" I cried, as the ladies in their borrowed dresses ran from the room. "The barricade will fall at any moment!"

Half dragging, half supporting Marie, Madame Coutance and I ran swiftly along the landing, as, with the noise of a river in flood, the crowd burst into the hall.

"Down with Condé!"

The shout was appalling, and even Marie's aunt, for all her bravado, shrank at it. The sound of the savage voices urged us on, through the servants' quarters, down a narrow staircase, into the kitchen, and so to the yard beyond. The door was already wide open, and we pushed through to a side street. Just in time! A portion of the mob had swept round to the back of the house, and almost directly we found ourselves in the midst of the crowd, fighting, pushing, struggling, with all our might to force a way through.

Marie, poor girl, clung to me nervously in an almost fainting state, but her aunt walked boldly with head erect and her eyes flashing like stars. In spite of the terrible danger I could hardly repress a smile at sight of this high-born dame in her servant's dress, compelled to struggle with the *canaille* like a woman of the markets. To make matters worse, we were forced to cry aloud,

"Down with Condé!" which I did lustily, but madame made many wry faces, and, but for her niece, would have refused outright. It was quite painful enough for her to hear others insulting the great hero.

Twice we were swung back to the door of the house, which was now completely wrecked; then, still surrounded by the mob, we were tossed, like floating straws, clear of the street. Since that night I have taken part in more than one fierce battle, but have never experienced the same feeling of horror as during that eventful struggle in the Rue Crillon.

The danger was not yet over; we had still some distance to walk, and every few yards we met groups of rioters hurrying to the work of destruction. Some cried, "Down with the Queen!" or "Down with the Parliament!" but most of them yelled "Down with Condé!" because for the moment that was the popular cry.

Just at first we walked rather briskly, but very soon Marie's pace became slower, she hung with greater weight on my arm, and I feared every moment she would faint; It was evident that unless she got better we should not reach St. Denis that night.

We were in a fairly quiet street when Madame Coutance suddenly exclaimed, "Let us rest a few minutes in this doorway. Marie, look up, child; there is nothing to fear now; we are safe here."

For answer, the girl, whose nerves were completely overwrought, shuddered and sobbed.

"Take me away," she cried, "oh, take me away. Back to Aunay; anywhere out of this horrible place."

"That is what we are going to do," I said soothingly. "I have a special permit which will pass us through the gate of St. Denis. But you must be strong and brave, or we shall not get there."

"I will try," she moaned, "I will try; but oh, it is horrible."

"Hush!" exclaimed her aunt sharply, "listen."

I had been too much occupied with Marie to pay attention to anything else, but now I distinctly heard the sound of voices on the other side of the door.

"Poor child," a woman was saying softly, "she is half dead with fright. Let her come in, I say."

"But the rioters?" exclaimed a second person.

"Pouf! The street is clear enough. Take down the bar, Jules." Then we heard a sound as of a heavy bar being removed.

The door opened ever so slightly and a woman cried, "Quick, come in, before you are seen. Where is the poor girl? Cheer up, my little one, no one shall harm you here. Now, Jules, put up the bar again! Ah! that is right. This way, monsieur," and she led us all into a tiny room, poorly furnished, but neat and clean.

She was a comely woman of middle age, rather short, with bright keen eyes, and pleasant face: her husband, Jules, was a ruddy-cheeked man, bald on the top of his head, but with a ring of stiff white hair which stood up like a fence.

"It is really very generous of you to risk so much for strangers," I began, but the woman would not let me finish.

"One cannot let a child die for want of a helping hand," said she briskly, "and as for these brigands, I would cut off all their heads at a blow. Ah, it is easy to see that you do not belong to the *canaille*."

I have had little experience of the sea, but as we sat in that room I think we must have felt like sailors who, after a stormy voyage, have glided into a peaceful harbour.

Both Jules and his wife were very attentive, especially to Marie, who was getting much calmer; they gave us food and drink, and offered to hide us in the house as long as we cared to stay.

"It is growing late," said they, "and you cannot go abroad to-night. To-morrow——"

"The danger will be just as great," interrupted Madame Coutance. "We thank you for your kind offer, but, believe me, it will be better for us to depart now. Monsieur has a pass, and once outside the city we shall be safe."

"And to-morrow," said Marie, "it may be too late. Besides, you may get into trouble for hiding us, and then I should never forgive myself."

As far as my plans were concerned it was better to start at once, but I took no part in the discussion one way or the other, though feeling extremely pleased when Madame Coutance

decided that we should sleep outside Paris.

The kindness of our good Samaritans, and the relief from the tumult, had done Marie so much good that she was ready to face the danger again, so, at the end of an hour, we prepared to start. I offered Jules a sum of money, but neither he nor his wife would take it, and we could only thank them, and hope they would not suffer for having afforded us a temporary refuge.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Ladies Leave Paris.

We could still hear the hoarse shouts of the people, but the streets in the direction of St. Denis were quiet, and the darkness prevented us from being observed. As Marie had recovered her strength we walked quickly, and finally arrived at the gate, where the Duke of Orleans had stationed a double guard. The officer on duty regarded us with suspicion, but I showed him the order, which he dared not disobey.

"You may pass, monsieur," said he with mocking politeness, "it is not for me to disapprove of the Duke's friends."

The fellow's words roused my anger, and my face burned, but time was too precious for me to quarrel with him. We had saved our lives, it is true, but our plight was still miserable enough.

"We must find somewhere to sleep," said Madame Coutance, "and in the morning we can hire a carriage. Marie is too tired to walk farther."

This was the best plan, but I knew nothing of St. Denis, and it was only after a weary search that I secured accommodation for them in a small inn. The place was dirty, and the landlord ugly enough to frighten one, but Marie and her aunt behaved very bravely, making no complaint. They retired to their room at once, while I kept guard outside the door with loaded pistols and naked sword.

The next morning I learned the lesson that it is not always well to judge by appearances. Touched by the ladies' distress, the innkeeper did all he could to help me, and, through his assistance, I succeeded in hiring a wretched cart to carry us a stage on our journey.

"I am sorry it is such a poor affair," said the man, "but there is not a carriage in the place. It is strange how many people have left Paris during the last few days. One would think the plague had broken out."

"The plague would have been less harmful," said I, remembering the scene in the Rue Crillon.

In view of Le Tellier's note all this delay was extremely awkward, but there was no help for it; I could not leave Marie and her aunt stranded at St. Denis.

Madame Coutance laughed merrily at sight of the clumsy vehicle, and she joked on my taste in choosing such an elegant equipage. However, we made the inside fairly comfortable with rugs and cushions, and, having paid the inn-keeper, I assisted the ladies to their seats and clambered in after them. The driver, a stolid, thick-headed fellow, cracked his whip, and we started off at a brisk trot, which, however, the horses did not keep up long.

Hitherto there had been no opportunity to speak of my cousin's death, but now I informed my companions of what had happened. Both were deeply grieved at the news, Madame Coutance especially showing more feeling than I should have expected.

"Did he die of his wound?" she asked.

"In a measure; but chiefly from the hardships endured through hiding from Condé."

"The prince would have forgiven him!"

"On conditions; and Henri would have refused them. My cousin was not the best of men, but he was loyal to his friends."

"You are right," exclaimed Madame Coutance warmly; "in many ways Henri de Lalande was a gallant gentleman. And now, what are you going to do?"

"As soon as you reach Aunay I shall join the King's friends."

"Ah!" she exclaimed with a smile, "I know you are against the prince, but I wish you success for yourself, and if you fall, well, the battlefield is a fit resting-place for a gentleman of France."

"I shall pray for you, Albert," whispered Marie, "that you may come safely through every danger. I hate all this fighting and bloodshed, and wish the country could be at peace."

"It will be soon," I answered, and then for a while we journeyed in silence.

About four o'clock in the afternoon we reached a large village, and the driver pulled up at the principal inn. This was the end of his stage, and though we offered him a handsome sum of money he refused to go a yard farther. He declared that his horses required rest, which was true enough, and that his master had ordered him to return to St. Denis in the morning.

"We must make the best of it," exclaimed Madame Coutance; "I daresay we can obtain some sort of accommodation for the night."

Our reception was far from encouraging, but when the innkeeper discovered that we were not penniless, his manner changed. The ladies were shown into the best room, a chamber was made ready for them, and the servants received orders to prepare a good meal. All this was extremely pleasant, but there was a greater slice of luck to follow. As soon as I had explained the situation he offered to solve our difficulty. A carriage? Certainly, he had the very thing, and a team of beautiful horses as well. Of course it would be expensive, but then, no doubt, monsieur would be willing to pay for the privilege.

Finally it was agreed that we should start at dawn, and I went to sleep that night with a feeling of relief. It was barely light when we sat down to breakfast, and the ladies shivered on going into the cold air, but the carriage was comfortable, and, when the leathern coverings were drawn down, warm.

"Decidedly an improvement on the open cart," exclaimed Madame Coutance, as she leaned back against the cushions. "We ought to reach Aunay before nightfall."

I earnestly hoped we should, as I was becoming uneasy concerning Le Tellier's note. However, as nothing could be done until the ladies were placed in safety, I endeavoured to dismiss the subject from my mind, and to appear as pleasant as possible. There is no need to linger over the details of the journey. We stopped two or three times for food and rest, and at one place to change the horses, but we met with no adventure of any kind, and arrived at the chateau about three o'clock, quite two hours sooner than I had dared to hope.

"Home again," said Marie softly, as we entered the hall, "and I hope it will be long before we leave it."

"Not until the prince rides triumphantly into Paris!" exclaimed her aunt. "Why do you smile, M. de Lalande? The prince has already beaten Mazarin, and he will make short work of the rest."

"Very likely, madame," I said, not wishing to be drawn into an argument, but, remembering the note in my pocket, I greatly doubted if the Cardinal were as completely overcome as his enemies believed.

It was a difficult matter to get away from Aunay that evening. The ladies declared I was tired, and begged me to stay until the next day, but this, though they were not aware of it, was out of the question. Finding at last that I was resolved to depart, Madame Coutance insisted on my wearing a plumed hat which had belonged to her husband, and told me to choose the best saddle-horse in her stables.

"True," said she, with a charming smile, "you are an enemy to the prince, but I do not forget that you are also one of my best friends."

[Transcriber's note: illustration missing from book]

The scene of my departure from the chateau is still very vivid in my memory. It was evening, and the sky flushed red with the glories of the setting sun. From afar came the tinkling of bells, the lowing of kine, and the chatter of the serving-men. The ladies stood on the terrace overlooking the fine park, and as I rode off they waved their hands in farewell, and wished me God-speed on the journey.

I was half sorry to plunge again into the strife, but the beautiful evening and the brisk ride soon restored my spirits. I wished Pillot had been with me, not alone for the sake of his company, but for his help also. However, I was young and strong, and having a certain amount of confidence in myself rode on cheerily enough.

On the third evening after leaving the chateau I arrived at Rheims, passing into the town just before the closing of the gates. The streets were filled with people who wore an air of excitement as if something was going forward. A number of soldiers loitered about in groups, but whether they were the King's friends or Condé's I could not determine, as they wore no distinguishing colours.

Riding slowly down one of the less frequented streets, I discovered an inn which had every appearance of being clean and comfortable.

"This is the place to suit me," I said half aloud, and was proceeding to dismount, when I caught sight of a man staring hard in my direction from the window of the opposite house, and while I was talking to the ostler the stranger had run down and clapped me on the back in the heartiest manner. He looked rather like a soldier of fortune who had fallen on evil times. His finery was distinctly faded, but he carried a good sword, and seemed capable of using it. His face was tanned by exposure to the weather, both cheeks bore the marks of sword-cuts, and there was a scar on his forehead just above the left eye. Altogether he appeared a far from desirable acquaintance.

"Henri, my boy," he cried, giving me another tremendous thwack, "how came you here? Ah, you are a sly rascal! Plotting more mischief, eh? Well, well, you are safe for me, though I am for the King."

The speaker rattled on at such a rate that I could scarcely manage to put in, "Pardon me, monsieur, but you have made a mistake."

"A mistake?" he exclaimed. "*Peste!* I must be growing old. My eyesight is failing. Aren't you Henri de Lalande? You are very much like him. Ah, no, I perceive now you are younger. He is an old friend, but we see little of each other. I am in the King's service and he is a Frondeur. But in private life, you know, eh?" and he gave me a vigorous dig in the ribs, following it up by saying, "Perhaps monsieur is a relative?"

I cannot say what my answer would have been, but just then I received another shock. A few yards farther along, standing well back against the wall, was a little man, evidently endeavouring to attract my attention. Directly his attempt succeeded he placed a finger on his closed lips, held it there a second or two, and vanished.

It was Pillot, and in my amazement I almost spoke the name aloud. How did he get there? What mystery was afoot now?

Presently the stranger, who had been trying to account for the new expression in my face, exclaimed, "Monsieur then is not a relative?"

"A relative," I answered vaguely, for the unexpected appearance of Pillot had put the soldier's remarks out of my head altogether; "I wish you would not pester me with your questions. I am tired and hungry, and do not understand what you mean."

"I am sorry, monsieur," he said humbly; "I have few friends, and seeing one of them, as I fancied, was carried away. Well, there, let it pass. Time was when Captain Courcy could ruffle it with the best."

He really seemed so downhearted that I was ashamed of my brusque behaviour, and exclaimed, "It is I who should ask pardon, monsieur, but indeed, I am badly in want of food and rest: I have ridden far. Later, perhaps, we shall meet again, when I am in better condition for talking."

"It may be so, monsieur," and, saluting me with a courtly bow, he turned and re-crossed the street, while I entered the inn and was ushered into a private room.

"A good supper, landlord," I said, "the best you have in the house, and while it is being prepared I will see to my horse."

"The servants will attend to the animal, monsieur," he answered; but it has always been a fancy of mine that every rider should see that his horse is made comfortable.

By the time I returned supper was ready, and I sat down to an ample meal, which reminded me strangely of the one I had eaten in La Boule d'Or on the night of my arrival in Paris. At that time, my purse was nearly empty; now it was full almost to bursting—a welcome difference.

After supper I leaned back in my chair, musing over the strange event that had occurred outside. But for one thing I should soon have banished all thoughts of Captain Courcy from my mind. He was, I imagined, a gentleman who, either through ill-luck or his own folly, had come to grief in the world, and was at present reduced to borrowing money from his acquaintances.

But if this were so, why had Pillot acted in such a strange manner? Why, indeed, was he in Rheims at all? I had ordered him to proceed to Aunay, which it was certain he had not done. I was still turning these things over in my mind when the door was pushed open softly, and Pillot himself entered. He glanced round the room cautiously, and finding me alone closed the door behind him.

"Monsieur is in danger," said he quietly, and without wasting any time in greeting; "his errand is known, and Condé's friends are tracking him."

I gave a start of surprise, and thought instantly of the man who had accosted me outside the inn; but Pillot, not allowing me time to speak, continued, "You were unlucky in choosing this street, monsieur. Captain Courcy with two others have ridden straight from Paris expecting to overtake you on the road. They were unaware that you had gone to Aunay, disguised in a blue

over-all and a workman's cap."

"If Mazarin ever returns to power, Pillot, I will ask him to put you at the head of police. How did you discover that secret?"

"It was whispered to me just after the funeral of monsieur's cousin. Monsieur will be pleased to hear that the Abbé himself performed the last rites."

"He could do little less, considering what my cousin had done for him. But now, about this other business! Has Captain Courcy recognised me?"

"Yes, and he is at present informing his friends of the discovery. But I had better begin at the beginning. After you had received the note—oh, it is well known, monsieur!—this Courcy and two others of his stamp were sent in pursuit. Concluding that you had gone straight to Bruhl, they rode day and night, changing horses on the road, through Rheims and almost as far as Mézieres. Naturally they were unsuccessful, and, not knowing what else to do, they returned here."

"And you followed them?"

"As far as Rheims, but no farther. Knowing you had gone to Aunay, I felt confident you could not be in front of us."

I sat drumming idly on the table, and wondering what was best to be done. The most simple plan was to give Pillot the note, but then I had faithfully promised Le Tellier that it should not go out of my possession. I was in a hobble. This Courcy was evidently an old campaigner, equally ready with his brain or sword. It would be hard to outwit him, and I guessed that he was more than my match in a fight.

Suddenly Pillot astonished me by asking where I had hidden the note. Perhaps it was foolish to trust one who had worked so hard for my enemies, but somehow I felt no fear that he would play me false. He had plotted willingly against Mazarin, but on the other hand he did not love Condé, and was hardly likely to assist him. Remembering these things, I answered without hesitation, "In my doublet."

"A poor hiding-place, monsieur," said he; "one always looks there first. Stay here a few minutes and I will show you a trick."

With that he stole out of the room, and closed the door, leaving me in a state of wondering excitement. He could certainly show me a trick now if he pleased, and an ugly one too, by returning with Captain Courcy. I confess that the idea did cross my mind, but I would not heed it, and in less than half-an-hour the dwarf returned alone.

"Now, monsieur," said he, "take off one of your riding-boots. Quick, we may be interrupted. Is it a large packet?"

"No," I answered, giving him the boot, "it is nothing more than a slip of paper."

With a sharp instrument he made a tiny slit at the back of the boot on the inside, just large enough to allow of the paper being inserted, and then with some shoemaker's implements sewed the edges together so neatly that one could hardly detect the joinings.

"There, monsieur," he exclaimed chuckling; "I doubt if Captain Courcy will be clever enough to discover that. Now, listen to me, monsieur. Your only plan is boldness. It is known you are in Rheims, and without a doubt the gates will be watched, while the captain will keep an eye on this inn."

"Well?" I exclaimed rather impatiently.

"Go into the common room, and show yourself as if you had nothing to fear. Do not hurry in the morning, but about ten o'clock ride out of the town. The others will follow, but they are not likely to attempt anything till nightfall. By keeping along the highroad to Mézieres, you will reach a village called Verdu. By that time, your horse will be tired, and you must ask the innkeeper if he knows of a horse for sale. Should he request you to go to the stables, invite your friends to accompany you."

"My friends?"

"Why, yes," exclaimed Pillot, "by then you will probably have three friends."

"Oh," said I, beginning to understand, "go on."

"The animal will not be worth buying, and you will return to your room. Since monsieur cannot leave Verdu without a horse, he may as well sit up late; there will be agreeable company."

"Now I am puzzled again."

Pillot laughed. "It is a child's trick, monsieur. When it is getting very late a man from the village will arrive with a fresh horse. After some delay you will go out and instruct him to call in

the morning."

"Yes," said I, still wondering.

"Monsieur will go out, but he will not return, and when his friends hurry to the stable they will find only two horses which cannot run a mile. Now I must slip away without being seen, and I trust you will remember not to start before ten o'clock."

After waiting a few minutes in order to let him get clear, I strolled into the common room, and sat a while talking with the people on the state of the country. Rather to my surprise very few of them spoke in favour of Condé, the majority exclaiming against him as a traitor, and saying he ought to be executed.

"He is a fine general, though," remarked the inn-keeper; "I fought under him at Rocroi."

"He has brought the Spaniards into the country," cried a stout-looking fellow, hotly, "and I will never forgive that. What say you, monsieur?"

"Why, I am of your opinion. The Frenchman who bargains with Spaniards to shoot down his own countrymen, is not deserving of much pity."

"Bravo, monsieur! Well said! I would have helped him fight Mazarin or any of these squabblers in Paris, but to raise arms against the King is a different matter. Perhaps monsieur belongs to the royal army?"

"You are not far from the mark," said I laughing; "you evidently have sharp eyes, my friend."

I looked about for Courcy, half expecting he would enter, but there was no sign of him, so at last I went to the chamber which had been prepared for me.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Captain Courcy Outwitted.

After securing the door I loaded my pistol, undressed, and stepped into bed, quite intending to remain awake all night. However, my eyes were heavy, I was tired out, and in spite of danger I soon fell asleep, not to waken again till a servant, hammering at the door, inquired if I was nearly ready for breakfast. Jumping up hastily, I took a glance round the room, and found to my relief that nothing had been disturbed.

"Pillot was right," I muttered, "the rascals are waiting till I am beyond the town. I wish Captain Courcy had introduced his two friends."

After making my toilet I went to the stables, where my horse, quite recovered from his fatigue, was looking in fine condition. Then, returning to the inn, I ate a substantial breakfast, and, obeying Pillot's injunctions, made no attempt to start till ten o'clock. How shrewdly the little man had judged my enemies' plans was made plain almost at the instant of my passing through the gate.

"I trust monsieur is better," exclaimed a voice in my ear, and there was Captain Courcy mounted on a powerful horse close by my side.

And here I must stop to mention that the old soldier performed his part very cleverly. He exhibited such surprise at seeing me, that, but for Pillot's warning, I should have believed we met by accident. As it was, he found me on my guard.

"I owe you an apology, captain," said I pleasantly; "I fear that last night you must have considered me very ill-mannered."

"No, no, the fault was mine. You were tired and I worried you thoughtlessly. Ah, now I see you are not my old friend, De Lalande."

"Yet I am a De Lalande," I laughed, telling him what he already knew; "Henri de Lalande was my cousin. He is dead now, poor fellow; you will not see him again."

"Dead?" he exclaimed in a tone of surprise; "Henri dead? No; it is impossible."

"Yet it is true! I was with him when he died."

It was vastly entertaining to watch the old rogue's antics as he expressed his astonishment, though knowing as well as I that my cousin was dead and buried, but I kept a grave face.

"Well, well," said he, "I shall miss him sorely. We were excellent friends, though there were twenty years between us. Do you know—— But there, I am wasting your time and my own. I have an errand in Mézieres. I suppose you are not riding in that direction?"

"As it happens it is precisely where I am going."

"How odd," he cried. "Why, if you do not object we can travel together. The roads are not over safe, and in case of danger one can help the other."

"A good plan, captain, though these highway robbers are not much to be feared! I always keep my sword sharp and my pistols loaded."

"And I warrant you can use both at a pinch. Henri, now, was a famous swordsman. Poor fellow; he would not leave that wretched Abbé, though I often begged him to come over to our side."

The easy, natural way in which the fellow foisted himself on me as a travelling-companion was really wonderful. There was no sign of any plan or arrangement; we were, it seemed, chance travellers proceeding to the same place, and having a subject to discuss which interested us both.

As for me, I endeavoured not to betray my suspicion, but you may be sure I did not sleep on the journey. Courcy himself, especially if he caught me at a disadvantage, was more than my match, while his two companions might appear at any moment. So I rode warily, keeping the captain on my left and taking care that he did not lag behind. Fortunately, perhaps, there were numerous people on the highroad, and once we overtook a body of troops wearing the King's colours. Their officer stopped and questioned us, but our answers being satisfactory he allowed us to proceed.

"Condé evidently has few friends in these parts," remarked the captain.

"And fewer still the farther we go, which is a lucky thing for us. I suppose your regiment is at Mézieres?"

"Why, no," he answered carelessly, and lowering his voice, he added, "the truth is I am despatched on a special service. I cannot very well say more but——"

"No, no, keep your secret," I interrupted hastily; "it is enough for me that you are on the King's side," at which the rascal smiled pleasantly, thinking how easy it would be to pluck such a simple goose.

About four o'clock we approached the village of Verdu, when, oddly enough, my horse began to show signs of distress, and I was compelled to slacken pace. The captain expressed his sorrow, and would not hear of riding on alone.

"No," said he, "it is not my custom to leave a comrade in the lurch. We will push on together, and perhaps in the village you may be able to purchase or hire another animal which will carry you as far as Mézieres. Besides, the night bids fair to be stormy, and we may as well lie snug at the inn."

For some time I had noticed the sky was becoming overcast; dark clouds were hurrying up, and, as we dismounted, the storm burst.

"*Corbleu!*" cried the captain, "only just in time! The inn will be full to-night," and as he spoke two other horsemen dashed up to obtain shelter.

The innkeeper bade us welcome, the servants led away our horses, and we all entered the house together. The last two comers sat at a distance from us, as if not wishing for company, but I did not for an instant doubt that they were the crafty captain's missing friends.

"Landlord," exclaimed one of them, "my friend and I will stay here to-night; so put your two best rooms in order."

"There are but two, monsieur," replied the innkeeper.

"We require only two, stupid, but see to it that the linen is clean and wholesome."

"Wait a moment, monsieur," cried the captain gaily, "this gentleman and I intend to stay here while the storm lasts, and we shall require one of these same rooms."

"Oh," said I, "pray leave me out of the question; I can sleep here in my cloak," but the captain blustered loudly, vowing that I should do nothing of the kind, and at last it was decided that he and I should share one of the rooms between us.

This point being finally settled, after much wrangling, we sat down to our meal, and the two strangers gradually became more friendly. It appeared they were on their way to Vouziers, but, foreseeing the storm, had turned back to seek shelter.

Thus far I had seen nothing of Pillot, but, remembering his advice, I asked the innkeeper if he

had a horse for sale or hire, explaining that I wished to leave early in the morning for Mézieres.

"I have none of my own, monsieur; horses are scarce in these parts since the troubles began; but there is one in the stables which belongs to a poor traveller who might sell it."

"Is it a good one?"

"Monsieur can judge for himself, but I do not think monsieur will care to ride it."

"Captain," said I, "will you come with me? You know more about a horse than I."

"Certainly," he exclaimed, jumping up. "Bring a lantern, landlord; we will go at once."

There were five horses in the stables—those of the captain and the two strangers, my own which was in a state of prostration, and a thin long-legged beast whose body was composed of skin and ribs.

On seeing this uncouth animal, the captain said with a laugh, "*Ma foi*, M. de Lalande, you would make a pretty picture riding into Mézieres on this brute. *Peste!* Let us return to the fire."

I asked where the owner was, and the innkeeper replied, "Somewhere in the village, monsieur, endeavouring to sell his goods."

"Is it not possible to obtain a decent animal anywhere?" I inquired.

"I will do my best," he answered, holding up the lantern to guide our steps as Courcy and I returned to the inn.

"It is a nuisance," exclaimed the captain, warming his hands at the fire, "but I fear you will have to stay here over to-morrow. If my business were not so urgent——"

"Oh, the landlord may find an animal by the morning, especially as I am prepared to pay a good price."

"Monsieur makes a thrust there," remarked one of the strangers; "one can do most things with a full purse. After all, it will only be a delay of a few hours or so."

We sat a long time listening to the storm, which, after a lull, had broken out with redoubled fury, and once or twice I detected a stealthy exchange of glances between Captain Courcy and the two travellers. Thus far their plans had worked out beautifully; I was, to all appearance, entirely in their power, and it would be easy for them during the night to abstract the note. The one point in my favour was that they believed I knew nothing of the plot, and I took pains not to undeceive them. I laughed at the captain's jokes, and applauded his stories, though half expecting every moment to hear him say, "And now, M. de Lalande, I will trouble you for that slip of paper."

However, the evening wore on, the storm stopped, the servants fastened the doors and went to bed, leaving their master to attend to us. And all the while, whether laughing or talking, I was listening anxiously for Pillot's signal. At last there came a tremendous knocking at the outside door, and we heard the innkeeper stump along the passage.

"A late guest," laughed Courcy; "he will find but scant accommodation. Oh, after all, it is only one of the villagers. What does he want, I wonder?"

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the innkeeper, putting his head into the room; "it is a man who has a horse for sale."

"I hope it isn't brother to the one in the stable!" exclaimed Captain Courcy with a laugh. "However, we may as well look at it, De Lalande, and then we will go to bed."

He was rising from his comfortable seat, when the landlord said, "The horse is not here; the man has only just heard in the village that monsieur required one."

"Still, he may bring it round soon enough in the morning! At what time do you intend to start, captain?"

"Not a moment later than six."

"Well, I will ask him," and without the least appearance of hurry, though my heart was thumping like a big hammer, I left the room.

This was the one critical moment. Would Courcy scent mischief and follow? I purposely left the door ajar so that they might listen to the conversation while they could see my hat and cloak in the room.

"Now, my man," I began brusquely, "about this horse? Can you bring it here by five o'clock in the morning?"

"Certainly, monsieur."

"If it suits me, there will be no haggling over the price, but unless the animal is thoroughly sound you will have your trouble for nothing."

"Monsieur will be satisfied, I know. It is as good a horse as one would wish to meet with."

"Well, we shall see. Be here at five o'clock sharp, or even a little earlier."

"Yes, monsieur," then the door slammed, and I was on the outside of the inn with Pillot.

"This way, monsieur, quick. Here is the captain's horse for you; I can manage the others. Here, Alphonse," and I saw a man at the animals' heads, "help me to mount, and then vanish. Unless you talk no one will suspect you. Ready, monsieur? Away then. Ah, they have discovered part of the trick and are running to the stables. Ho, ho! Captain Courcy! Captain Courcy!"

There was a shout from the inn; then a pistol shot, and my late companions ran this way and that in confusion.

"Not a moment later than six, captain," I cried. "Shall I carry a message to your friends in Mézieres?" and then, with a triumphant laugh, we clattered off in the darkness.

"We have scored the trick and the game," said Pillot, "though I thought we were beaten when the captain talked of coming out. However, they cannot catch us now, before reaching Mézieres, and beyond that they will not venture."

Nothing more was said for a long time; we rode hard side by side, Pillot leading the third horse. It was still dark and a high wind had sprung up, but the rain had ceased. Occasionally we stopped to listen, but there was no sound of galloping hoofs in the rear, and, indeed, we hardly expected that the captain and his friends would follow very far. Pillot reckoned the distance from Verdu to Mézieres at thirty miles, and with several hours' start it seemed ridiculous to think of pursuit. Presently we slackened pace, and I asked Pillot if he was sure of the road.

"I think so; I have been making inquiries. By the way, monsieur must be very cold without a hat."

"It is not pleasant; but better lose a hat than a head!" I replied with a laugh.

Pillot proved a good guide, and Mézieres was still half asleep when we rode into the town and pulled up at the principal inn.

"We can give ourselves two hours' rest," said the dwarf, "and then, in case of accidents, we had better proceed. After breakfast, monsieur can provide himself with a fresh hat and cloak."

"I will send for them, which will save time. We must leave nothing to chance, Pillot. I am much mistaken if this Captain Courcy is the man to confess himself beaten."

"He is beaten this time, confession or no confession," answered the dwarf, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Still, it is always well not to be too confident."

While we waited for breakfast he proceeded to give a brief account of his doings. Before leaving the inn at Rheims he had slipped into my horse's feed a powder, which, after a few hours' exercise, would produce a temporary weakness. Then, directly the gates were open, he had started for Verdu on the sorry beast which the innkeeper had showed me. On the plea of being a poor man he had obtained permission to sleep in an outhouse, and then his only difficulty was to discover some one who would help him in bringing out the horses. All this he related in high glee, laughing merrily at the idea of having tricked the gallant captain.

I inquired if he was sure the others were in the plot, to which he replied, "Perfectly, monsieur; they are both in Condé's pay, but just at present they will not have much to show for their wages!" and he laughed again.

"Thanks to you," I said warmly. "But for your cleverness, I should have fallen into the pit."

As soon as the horses were rested and I had provided myself with a new hat and cloak, we made a fresh start, riding fast till Mézieres was at least a dozen miles in our rear.

I do not propose to linger over the remainder of the journey; if the account were a tithe as tedious as the actual ride I should lose all my readers. As far as Captain Courcy and his friends were concerned the paper was safe; they were not in the least likely to catch us, and if they did, Mazarin had as many friends as foes in that part of the country. Our chief danger now came from the highwaymen who prowled about the roads, and twice we were attacked by these worthies, who, however, upon finding us well-armed and resolute to defend ourselves, quickly moved off.

It was, I think, on the fifth morning from leaving Mézieres that we rode into Bruhl, and being directed to the Cardinal's residence, encountered Roland Belloc, who at first did not recognise me.

"Have you quite forgotten me?" said I.

"De Lalande? Is it possible? I understood you were still in Paris."

"I was there until a few days ago. But where is the Cardinal? I have a letter for him, and as soon as it is delivered I want to go to bed."

"You shall see him at once, follow me."

"Put the horses up somewhere, Pillot," I said, and throwing the reins to him, followed Belloc.

Several French gentlemen wearing Mazarin's colours lounged about; the courtyard was filled with soldiers, and sentries were stationed at the entrance. As for the Cardinal himself he looked very little like a beaten man.

"M. de Lalande," he purred in his silkiest tones, as Belloc showed me into the room. "You have been a long time doing my errand!"

"A sword-thrust in the side kept me in bed some weeks," I replied, "and on my return to the city I found that your Eminence was no longer there."

"Paris had grown unhealthy," said he smiling, "so I sought the purer air of the country. You, I believe, preferred the quiet seclusion of the Bastille."

"The choice was none of mine, my Lord."

"No? And so you have come to share my fortunes again?"

"I have brought your Eminence a letter from Le Tellier," and I handed him the document, which I had previously taken from its hiding-place.

Opening the note, he read the communication quickly, and, turning to me with a smile, exclaimed: "De Lalande, I certainly must keep you by my side! Positively, you always bring me good-luck. I am deeply in your debt, but my secretary shall settle our account. You must don the green scarf and join my body-guard."

This was a great honour, and I thanked him warmly, but he interrupted me with a laugh, saying, "It is well, in these troublous times, to have a skilful sword to rely on, and I have proved the worth of yours. You will find your comrades brave youths and all anxious to distinguish themselves. *Pardieu!* Condé has made a huge blunder and played into my hands nicely. Request M. Belloc to find you quarters—and now I must deal immediately with my correspondence."

Thus it was that I came to take service again with Mazarin, and to wear the green scarf in many a hot encounter.

Sturdy old Belloc was delighted to have me under his charge, and, as there was no room at Mazarin's residence, he arranged that I should stay at the inn where Pillot had stationed the horses.

"And now," he said, "get some breakfast and go straight to bed. I will come over during the evening for a chat. I am curious to learn how you fared in Paris."

"The story will surprise you, but I am too tired to tell it now."

"Yes," said he, kindly, "you evidently need a long rest."

It was strange to get into bed without feeling any cause for alarm. From sheer force of habit I placed my weapons handy, but there was no barricading of the door, or listening for the sound of stealthy footsteps, and almost before my head touched the pillow I was fast asleep. Pillot, whose powers of endurance were marvellous, wakened me early in the evening, and when M. Belloc paid his promised visit, all traces of my recent fatigue had vanished.

The old soldier displayed intense interest in my story, especially to those parts relating to the plot against Condé and my cousin's death.

"I am sorry for Henri," he said, "he was a bit of a rascal, but a brave fellow for all that, and he stood by the Abbé from the beginning. However, things have altered now, and before six months have passed Mazarin will be in Paris again. Condé will make a stiff fight, but we are bound to win, and if you live your fortune is made."

"Unless Mazarin suffers from a lapse of memory," I remarked. "So far his payments have been made mostly in promises, which do little towards keeping a full purse."

At this M. Belloc laughed, but he assured me that when the day of reckoning came I should have no cause to complain.

CHAPTER XXV.

I Miss a Grand Opportunity.

For several weeks now I stayed idly at Bruhl, having nothing to do beyond an occasional turn of duty, which was really more a matter of form than of aught else.

Underneath the peaceful surface there were, to shrewd observers, signs of a stirring agitation. Couriers came and went by night and day; noblemen of high rank made mysterious visits, stayed a few hours, and then disappeared; a rumour arose that the Cardinal had actually been recalled to Court. It was even said that the order was contained in the letter I had carried from Paris, but on that point I was still in ignorance. By degrees, however, it became plain that the Cardinal had resolved to return and I learned from Belloc that Marshal Hocquincourt was busy raising an army to conduct him across France.

No one was more pleased to receive this news than Pillot, who could not live happily without excitement. He uttered no complaint, but I knew he was longing to be back in his loved Paris, from which he had never before been so long absent. To Pillot the walls of the capital bounded the one oasis in a desert world.

One evening, early in December, Belloc ordered me to be ready for a start the next morning. The die was cast; Mazarin had made up his mind, and I was to form one of the advance-guard in the journey to Sedan.

"Bravo!" cried Pillot, joyfully; "it is time we moved, monsieur. I am beginning to forget what Paris is like."

During the evening he was in a state of excitement, polishing my weapons and setting them in order, running to the stables to attend to the animals, and packing food for consumption on the march. As for sleeping, I am nearly sure that he did not close his eyes all night.

The advance-guard formed a goodly cavalcade. Most of my comrades were either sons of noblemen, or at least cadets of some distinguished house. They were well-mounted and richly dressed, and all wore the green scarf of Mazarin. Like Pillot, they were delighted at the idea of returning to Paris again, and gave no thought to the fact that many of them would never reach the city walls.

M. Belloc remained with the Cardinal, but I had made several new friends, and the journey, though full of peril, was pleasant enough. We youngsters laughed and joked, formed plans for the future, defeated Condé many times over—in imagination—and, I think, each of us secretly felt sure of becoming a Marshal of France. The older ones shook their heads, foretelling a long and difficult campaign, but we paid scant heed to their melancholy prophecies.

Pillot, who travelled with the attendants, made me an object of envy to my comrades. Never was there such a capital servant or one so full of contrivances. Once, through some stupid mistake, we were compelled to halt for the night on a dreary, barren waste. It was bitterly cold, being almost mid-winter; we had no tents, and indeed no other shelter than our cloaks.

The young nobles stamped about in high dudgeon, bidding their attendants light fires and bring food, though there was no wood to be seen, and the last of the provisions had been eaten in the morning. The poor lackeys raced about here and there endeavouring to accomplish what was quite out of the question, but the exercise at least kept them warm. I did not call Pillot, and, indeed, two minutes after the order to halt he had vanished. I thought it odd, but made no remark, and dismounting like the others walked about briskly to restore the circulation in my numbed limbs.

Presently some one nudged my elbow, and a voice whispered softly, "Let monsieur choose three of his friends and follow me."

Rather astonished, I sought out three of my comrades and we followed the dwarf, who led us perhaps two hundred yards, and stopped at a sheltered gully.

"Those who come first get the best seats," said he, and going down on his knees fumbled about for a time, till at last we broke into an exclamation of delight.

"A fire!" cried one.

"Pillot, you are a genius!" said I, and the other two declared he ought to be made a nobleman.

How he managed it was a mystery, but there was the fire blazing cheerfully, and in another moment a fowl spitted on a pike was roasting in the flames. We overwhelmed Pillot with thanks, and what he considered more to the purpose—gave him a share of the bird. It was rather tough and very stringy, but when one is hungry these defects pass as trifles.

Before long our fire attracted general attention, and as many as could crowded around it. Then, not wishing to be selfish, we vacated our seats in favour of others, and, wrapped in our

mantles, lay down in the shelter of the hollow. This was our worst hardship, and at length we reached Sedan, where Mazarin, who arrived the next day, took up his abode with Marshal Fabert.

In the early part of the year 1652, we moved once more, and, crossing the frontier, re-entered France in triumph. Every day now added to our strength. We were joined by Marshal Hocquincourt, who commanded 5000 soldiers, each wearing the green scarf of the Cardinal. Here and there a number of officers rode up decorated with the same colours; town after town opened its gates at the first summons, and Mazarin might well have imagined that his period of exile was over.

"Well, Pillot," said I one evening, "what do you think of all this?"

"It is a fresh act in a comedy, monsieur, in which the next is not yet written."

"Not even thought out, perhaps."

"There is no thinking, monsieur, or the play would become a tragedy. As to your Mazarin, he may be flying for his life again to-morrow."

"I hardly think so; he has the young King on his side now."

"Well, well, monsieur, it matters little as long as we enter Paris. After all that is the chief thing."

I did not answer him, but my mind turned to the frightful misery of the district through which we were passing. The country lay unfilled for miles; the woods swarmed with robbers; the peasants were dying of starvation; the towns were filled with people who had neither work nor food. Everything except fighting was at a standstill: trade was dead, manufactures had ceased, and no one cared to sow the seed when others would eat the crops.

A young officer in Hocquincourt's army informed us that affairs were equally bad in Paris. Rendered desperate by hunger, the citizens were up in arms, and no one's life was safe for a day. By a stroke of good fortune the Queen-Mother had escaped from the city, and was now with the young King at Poitiers. Of Raoul I could learn nothing, but the Duke of Orleans was still see-sawing; now helping Condé, and again endeavouring to make terms with the King. In these circumstances I half expected to find my old comrade at Poitiers, where it was almost certain John Humphreys would be.

Meanwhile we marched peacefully through the country, and the friends of Condé, if the rebel prince possessed any friends in these parts, remained very quiet, and most of the people cheered Mazarin as loudly as they had before hooted him. At Poitiers itself we had a magnificent reception. We marched along with drums beating and banners flying; the road was lined with throngs of excited people cheering madly for the army of the Cardinal, and presently a loud cry announced the coming of the King.

Thunders of applause arose on all sides, and people screamed themselves hoarse shouting, "*Vive le Roi!*" "*Vive Mazarin!*"

I caught a glimpse of the boy king and his young brother as they joined the Cardinal, and rode with him to the town, where the Queen waited at a window to see him pass. It must have been a proud moment for the man who had once been ignominiously expelled from France.

As soon as the procession broke up, I instructed Pillot where to stable the horses, and went about seeking Raoul and John Humphreys. The town was filled with soldiers and officers of the Court, while thousands of the troops were quartered in the neighbouring villages. I met several old friends, but not Raoul, when suddenly I heard a hearty, "How are you, De Lalande?" and there was the smiling face of an officer of the Queen's Guards.

"John Humphreys!" I exclaimed, and then grasping the meaning of his new uniform, "you have received a commission? Splendid! I knew from the first it must come. Presently, my dear fellow, you must tell me all about it, but first, do you know anything of Raoul Beauchamp? Is he still at the Luxembourg, or has he joined the King?"

"Turenne has given him a commission in the royal army, and he is quartered in one of the villages near. If you are not on duty we will visit him."

"With all my heart! I have nothing in particular to do before the morning."

"Very well; it is not far; we can walk easily."

The district round Poitiers had the appearance of a huge camp, and the white scarves of the King mingled with the green ones of the Cardinal. We moved with some difficulty, until, at last, getting clear of the crowd, we reached the road, or rather cart-track leading to the village.

"There he is!" cried Humphreys presently. "Just returned, I warrant, from visiting his troopers; he looks after them well," and, glancing ahead, I observed my old comrade about to enter the village inn.

"Raoul!" I shouted, "Raoul!" and at the sound he turned back to meet us.

"I told you that De Lalande would come to no harm!" exclaimed Humphreys with a laugh.

"He was as anxious as I, Albert," said Raoul. "We discovered that you had escorted the ladies to Aunay, but after that no one could guess what had become of you. Naturally, we expected to find you with the army."

"Instead of which I was at Bruhl with the Cardinal. I concluded Humphreys would guess what the secret service was."

"Come to my room," said Raoul; "we must hear your story."

As there could be no harm in mentioning the matter now, I related what had passed, and they were much amused by Pillot's trick at Verdu.

"But you must keep out of Courcy's way for a time," said Raoul. "I know him well, and he is a tremendous fire-eater. I expect he has joined Condé in the field by now."

"Where is D'Arçy?"

"At the Luxembourg, and thoroughly miserable. He hates the idea of supporting Condé against the King, but imagines he ought not to desert the Duke of Orleans. Most of his comrades came with me, but he would not. 'I am for Orleans,' he said, 'no matter whom he is against.' Of course, he is right in a way."

"Not at all," declared Humphreys. "Condé is a rebel, and has assisted the enemies of his own country. Every man should regard him as a traitor."

"Well," said Raoul frankly, "it was his trafficking with the Spaniards that decided me to fight against him. I am for France, whoever rules the country."

"I am for the King," said Humphreys. "My father taught me to say, 'For God and the King!' as soon as I could talk. That was my earliest lesson."

"And yet your people cut off their king's head!"

"A set of sour knaves," he cried, "but the finest fighting men in the world! You should have seen them at Naseby with their leader, Cromwell! Old Noll we call him; he rules the country now, while Prince Charles, the rightful king, is here in exile."

"When our own troubles are settled we will set your prince on his throne," laughed Raoul. "Mazarin will provide him with an army, and Albert and I will obtain commissions in it. Then we shall see your country for ourselves."

"Ah," exclaimed Humphreys, "you do not understand the English any more than I understand your Parisians. If Prince Charles crossed the water now with a French army, he would never be king; his own friends would fight against him. He must wait awhile till his people have recovered their senses, then they will beg him to return."

"By the way," said I, "you have not told me yet how you won your commission."

"A lucky accident; a mere trifle; what you call a bagatelle."

"Have you not heard?" inquired Raoul. "I must relate the story myself, as our friend here is as modest as brave. The affair occurred at Montrond, and the whole camp talked of it."

"Things were very dull just then," interrupted Humphreys.

"We were besieging the town," continued Raoul, "and one night the enemy made a sortie. It took us by surprise; our outposts were rushed, a dozen officers fell, and the troops were panic-stricken. General Pallnau was with the Court, and the next in command lost his head. As it chanced our friend was staying with me that night, and he stopped the rout."

"No, no," said the Englishman, with a smile; "he is making too much of it altogether."

"He saved the army at least. My quarters happened to be on a hill. Condé's troops were pouring towards it; half our men had scattered, and the others were wavering, when Humphreys sprang to the front, calling us to rally. A few of us ran up, and only just in time. The enemy, perceiving we held the key to the position, swarmed to the attack. We, knowing how much depended on every minute's delay, stood our ground. Once we rolled them back, but they came again. Our men fell fast, but Humphreys was a host in himself, and through him we held on till the runaways had time to re-form. Every one declared he had saved the army, and he received his commission on the field."

"And the credit was as much Raoul's as mine," said Humphreys, "but things go like that in this world. I suppose, now that Mazarin's troops have reinforced us, we shall march south and fight Condé."

"It is possible, though there is a whisper that we are to move on Angers. I wish we three could keep together."

"It would be splendid," said Raoul, "but we must make the most of our opportunities," which, as long as the army remained in the neighbourhood of Poitiers, we did.

Very soon, however, we advanced on Angers, and having captured that town removed to Saumur. Here we were joined by Marshal Turenne, and being too weak to reduce the important town of Orleans proceeded to Gien. Raoul was quartered with his regiment some miles away, but Humphreys and I were both stationed in the town. I was spending an hour with him one evening when Pillot, in a tremendous hurry, came with a message that M. Belloc wished to see me immediately.

"It must be something important, monsieur," said the dwarf, "as M. Belloc ordered me to saddle the horses."

I found my old friend in a state of great agitation, and without giving me time to speak he asked, "Do you know where Condé is?"

"In Guienne, monsieur."

"So we all thought, but it is a mistake. He is hurrying to take command of the army of the Loire. A courier has just arrived with the information, and we are despatching parties to capture him, dead or alive. He is travelling with six companions, and will endeavour to reach Chatillon. If he can be caught, we shall finish the war in a week. You are well acquainted with the prince?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Take half a dozen troopers; ride to the bridge at Chatillon, and let no one pass till I send permission."

"Very good, monsieur," and within ten minutes I was tearing along at the head of my men as fast as my horse could gallop.

It was still fairly light when we arrived at the spot, and, leaving two of the troopers on the bank to look after the horses, I ambushed the others, and took up my own position so that no one could pass without being challenged. Soon the light faded, the air grew chill, a gray mist rose from the river. The men crouched silently in their hiding places; the only sounds were the melancholy lapping of the water, and the mournful cry of an occasional night-bird. M. Belloc's commission was certainly an honour, but this watching was dreary work, and I thought with regret of my cosy quarters.

It must have been an hour past midnight when Pillot, who had kept me company, whispered softly, "Listen, monsieur! Do you hear the beat of hoofs? I should say there are a couple of horsemen coming this way."

"Or more. No, there is only one."

"The others have stopped."

"Perhaps there was only one in the first instance. He is drawing nearer now. Listen, he has reached the bridge. Stand well behind me, so that he cannot observe you."

The horseman had approached at a trot; now he slowed down to a walking pace, and advanced carelessly, humming a tune as if there was no such thing as danger in the world.

With a loud "*Qui Vive?*" I sprang from my hiding-place and clutched his horse's bridle.

"An officer of the King," he replied coolly, and the white scarf on his arm showed up in the darkness. "I have come from the Marshal to ask for your report. I can testify at least that you keep an excellent watch."

The man's voice sounded familiar, but concluding we had met at the Court, I was in all innocence about to answer when Pillot, touching me lightly, whispered "Captain Courcy!"

In a flash I remembered, but it was too late. The captain's sharp ears had caught the words; with a violent wrench he twisted my arm from the bridle, and turning his horse's head dashed back at headlong speed.

"Stop him!" I yelled, "stop him!" but the rascal knocked over two of my men like rabbits, and disappeared along the bank of the river.

"Condé is not far off," said Pillot; "he feared a trap and sent the captain on in advance."

"Mount, and ride after them. Take a man with you, keep on their track and pick up all the King's friends you meet. Say it is the order of Marshal Turenne. Two of you fellows get your horses and cross to the other side of the river. Keep your eyes open and spread the news that Condé is hiding in the neighbourhood. There is a fortune for the man who captures him."

The troopers mounted and galloped off; Pillot had already disappeared, and I was left with one man to attend to my wounded troopers. Fortunately they were not seriously hurt, though of little more use that night. As it chanced, however, nothing further occurred, and when Belloc sent to relieve us, I rode back feeling that I had missed a grand opportunity. My troopers accomplished nothing, but Pillot, who did not return for several hours, brought the certain news that Condé, accompanied by several gentlemen, had crossed the river.

"Never mind," said M. Belloc kindly, "you did your best, and no one can do more. Besides, even if you had caught this Captain Courcy, the prince would have escaped," which was quite true, though the reflection did not make my feelings any the more friendly towards the daring captain.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Vive le Roi!"

The day after Condé's narrow escape I received a visit from Raoul. He was as lively as ever, and in high spirits at the prospects of fresh work. My connection with Mazarin prevented me from sharing in many of the minor engagements, but Raoul missed nothing. His courage was a proverb among Turenne's gentlemen, while the soldiers followed without question on the most dangerous enterprise if Raoul Beauchamp led the way.

"What is going on now?" I inquired.

"A general advance, I believe; at least we have received orders to move; the Marshal does not like to sit still."

I laughed at that, for Turenne was a general who allowed neither his own troops nor the enemy any rest. Ambush and surprise, hot attack and feigned retreat, he employed them all, keeping every one busy. Raoul had not heard of Condé's movements, and when I told him, he exclaimed, "We can keep our eyes open now, Albert; there will be little time for sleeping when the prince takes command of his army. A good thing for us that Turenne is on our side. Most likely that accounts for our advance. Don't you envy us?"

"Well, I should not object if the Green Scarves were sent to the front."

"You will have your chance," said he laughing, and wishing me farewell, departed to join his men.

The town was a scene of unusual activity that day. Soldiers were moving about in all directions. Here a column of infantry trudged along; there a squadron of horse passed at the trot; occasionally a gaily-dressed gentleman with a white or green scarf on his arm flew by, bound on some errand of importance. Once I met Humphreys, who, much to his disgust, had received orders to remain behind with a number of the Queen's Guards.

"There will be stirring business soon," said he. "Turenne is moving, and I hear that Condé has arrived from the south on purpose to oppose him. It will be a battle of giants, and here are we tied up in this wretched hole doing nothing. We shan't even see the fight, much less take part in it."

"Why, you are becoming a regular fire-eater! Have you not had enough fighting?"

"I only object to all the work being done by others. I would rather take my own share. What are you supposed to be doing?"

"Nothing, and for once in a way it is a very pleasant occupation. Have you met Raoul?"

"No, and I expect he is a dozen miles off by now. He is in luck; his squadron acts as a kind of bodyguard to the Marshal. I had no idea that Beauchamp was such a daring fellow."

"He is like the rest, anxious to make a name for himself. Ah, here comes Pillot to warn me that it is my turn for duty."

Gien was still crowded with numbers of the Queen's troops, gentlemen of the King, and Mazarin's bodyguard, in addition to the hosts of servants and attendants on the Court. Hundreds watched Turenne's advance, and almost every one seemed to imagine that the Marshal had little to do but march peacefully to Paris.

From the gossip among Mazarin's gentlemen next morning I gathered that Turenne had halted at a place called Briare, while Hocquincourt, our second general, had advanced to Blenau.

"The Marshal is preparing his plans," exclaimed one of our fellows complacently, "and if Condé's army stays to fight it will be soundly beaten. I prophesy that within a month we shall be inside Paris."

I remembered these boastful words and laughed, when, a night or two afterwards, Pillot burst into my room and wakened me rather brusquely.

"Get up, monsieur," said he, "Condé has sent to announce his arrival."

"Condé," I growled sleepily. "Where? What do you mean? What is all the noise outside?"

"The town has gone mad with fright—that is all. Monsieur must be quick in dressing."

In a few minutes I was dressed and out of the house. Pillot was right—the town certainly had gone mad. The street was packed with people surging this way and that, pushing, struggling, and asking questions. There were hundreds of rumours in the air: Condé had crept into Gien, and had hanged Mazarin in his own room. The Queen-Mother was a prisoner with her two sons, and all her Guards had died fighting. I had hardly witnessed such a tumult even in Paris. Couriers and lackeys, coachmen and grooms; soldiers, citizens, peasants, and ladies of the Court, were all grouped together, making the oddest spectacle. No one really knew what had happened, though a hundred people were willing to tell.

I would have gone straight to the Cardinal's quarters, but such a course was out of the question; so, following Pillot, I found myself on a piece of high ground to the left of the town.

"Ah!" said I, drawing a deep breath, "now it is plain what has occurred. You are right, Pillot, that is a message from Condé, sure enough!"

The night was dark, but far away in the distance the gloom was lit up by numerous tongues of fire that extended for miles. Now one died away, but the next minute a fresh one shot skyward, and in places several merged together in one broad flame.

"Condé is amusing himself and providing us with a fine spectacle," said Pillot. "It seems to me that the prince has lost neither his cunning nor his boldness. Turenne is a good soldier, but it looks as if Condé were a better."

"Turenne is not over there. Condé has fallen on General Hocquincourt, and things will be serious for the Marshal."

"And for the Cardinal," laughed Pillot, who never saw any good in Mazarin; "he must run, monsieur, and fast, too."

"So must we—he will need help. Come, let us find him."

This, however, was not a simple matter, and we were nearly an hour in forcing a way to Mazarin's rooms. They were empty, and the frightened servants had no idea where their master was. Some asserted he had gone to reassure the Queen; others that he had galloped off to the battlefield, at which Pillot laughed unkindly.

Turning back I encountered Humphreys, who, with a dozen troopers, was clearing a passage through the crowd. In answer to my question he said that Mazarin had ridden toward the river, where he himself was going; so, bidding Pillot stay behind, I joined company with the Englishman.

"Well," said I, as we rode along, "Gien is not such a humdrum place after all!"

"Faith! this Condé has played a clever game. A courier has brought word that Hocquincourt's army has vanished, while Turenne has only about four thousand men with which to oppose fourteen thousand. And look at this rabble! Out of the way there, or we will ride you down!"

"Have you had orders to join Turenne?"

"No," he answered, with a touch of scorn. "My duty is to escort the carriages, which are all on the other side of the river. The Queen has sent for them, so that her ladies can escape if Turenne gets beaten—which he will. Ah! there is Mazarin with the King. Look how the boy manages his horse! He should make a fine cavalry leader in time."

Leaving Humphreys, I turned aside to the edge of the plain, where the boy king and Mazarin were surrounded by a group of gentlemen. Louis was flushed and excited, but he showed no fear, and, indeed, I heard that he begged hard for permission to gallop to the scene of conflict. At frequent intervals Mazarin despatched a gentleman on some errand. His face was pale, and he looked anxious, which was not to be wondered at, since the safety of the Court depended on so slender a thread.

Presently, catching sight of me, he said, "De Lalande, come here. I see you have a good horse. Do not spare it, but ride top speed to Marshal Turenne, and inquire if he has any message for His Majesty."

"Yes, my Lord!" I answered, and saluting, rode off quickly.

The confusion was worse here than in the town. Crowds of ladies, attended by their servants, waited anxiously for the carriages; boxes and bales lay strewn around, and directly a carriage appeared the whole mob rushed at it, fighting like the *canaille* of Paris. Once past the bridge, however, it was possible to increase the pace, and at Briare I began to make inquiries as to where the Marshal was most likely to be found.

"On the plain between this and Blenau," said an officer who had received orders to stop at Briare with a few troops. "Do you bring any fresh news from Gien?"

"None, except that the place is upside down with fear. Condé has managed to startle the Court."

"He would do more than that if we were under any general but Turenne, and even he will have need of all his skill."

Far away in the distance the houses were still burning, and now and again a fresh sheet of flame would leap skyward. Here and there I met with riderless horses, and men bringing in wounded comrades. They all told the same story. Condé had fallen upon Hocquincourt, and simply swept his army away. His quarters were in ruins, many of his infantry were killed, and his cavalry had become a mere rabble.

"Everything depends on Turenne," said a wounded officer whom I knew slightly. "If he can hold his ground, all may yet be well, but the odds are terribly against him."

At length I reached the plain where the Marshal had drawn up his troops, and, though quite unversed in real soldiering, I could see that he had chosen a position of great strength. Beyond the plain were a marsh and a wood—one on the left, the other on the right—with a narrow causeway over which the enemy must pass, between them. The wood was filled with infantry, while a battery of artillery was stationed so as to command the causeway.

Noticing a group of officers at the entrance to the plain, I rode over and asked where I should have the most chance of finding Marshal Turenne.

"With the cavalry, monsieur," one of them answered courteously, and glancing at my green scarf, added, "Do you come from Gien?"

"Yes, with a message from the Cardinal."

"Ah," said another, "I suppose this business has frightened the Court? Condé has made a good start, but he will meet his equal now."

"The Marshal is overweighted," remarked a third man, gloomily. "His Majesty can trust us to die here, but I doubt if we can stop the prince from breaking through. He has four men to our one."

This did not sound very cheerful, and before long I heard that several officers of the highest rank were just as doubtful of success. However, my business lay with the Marshal himself, so I advanced to the causeway, and found that he was at the farther end with two or three squadrons of cavalry. He was talking earnestly with a group of officers, so I waited till he had finished, and then, with a salute, gave him the Cardinal's message.

At first he appeared angry, but gradually a smile stole over his face, and he exclaimed, "*Corbleu!* His Eminence is a very glutton for information. I have just sent the Marquis of Pertui with a despatch to His Majesty, and there is nothing fresh to add. A battle is not fought in five minutes!"

I bowed low, and presently he added kindly, "You can stay here: in an hour or so I may have some information to send back."

Saluting him in answer, I backed my horse to the rear of the group, when some one cried, "De Lalande!" and glancing round I observed Raoul, with his troopers stationed close at hand.

"What are you doing here?" he asked gaily, as I went over to him. "I understood you were guarding Mazarin!"

"I have brought a message for the Marshal, and am to wait for an answer."

"You will see some hot work presently. Ah, there is Bordel! He brings fresh news of the prince, I warrant."

An officer, followed by an escort of troopers, had just galloped in from the country behind Blenau. His horse was covered with foam, and he himself was bleeding from a wound, but he jumped lightly to the ground, saluted, and began talking earnestly to the Marshal. We could not hear what was said, but his information was evidently serious, for Turenne immediately sent off several of his staff.

"Condé is approaching!" exclaimed Raoul, and even while he was speaking an officer galloped over with orders from Turenne for the squadron to hold itself in readiness.

I had met with numerous adventures in my short career, but had never witnessed a real battle, and I was on fire with excitement. Raoul desired me to return to the rear, saying there was no need to expose myself to danger, but I shook my head and resolved to stay with him.

With a few of his staff the Marshal advanced beyond the end of the causeway, but presently came riding back, and every man knew instinctively that Condé was quickly approaching. Presently we caught a glimpse of his cavalry, and at sight of the serried ranks of horsemen, most of our hearts, I think, began to droop. It seemed to me that, by one swift rush across the causeway, they would have us completely at their mercy.

As if of the same opinion Turenne ordered us to retire, and we fell back slowly, while the hostile cavalry halted to gather strength for the spring. Then came the order to increase the pace, and our men sullenly obeyed. They did not like retreating, even to escape from death. Raoul looked puzzled, and from time to time I noticed him glance back over his shoulder.

Suddenly a whisper of "Here they come!" ran through the ranks; our pace grew faster, and soon we were flying like timid hares before a pack of dogs.

Condé's cavalry made a splendid show. Squadron after squadron, fifteen or twenty in number, advanced with pennons flying and banners waving in the breeze. The sun shone on the steel-tipped lances, and the bared swords flashed like a forest of steel. Nearer and nearer thundered the horses: their hoofs rang hard on the causeway, and I expected every moment to hear the roar of our artillery. But every gun was dumb; not one opened its mouth, and not a single musket shot came from the shelter of the thick wood.

What did it all mean? I did not know; in the excitement, did not even guess; it was enough that Turenne with his handful of troopers was flying before Condé's host. Still we maintained our order, and though riding fast rode together, every man preserving his proper place and distance. Suddenly there came an order from the Marshal, and like a flash we turned with our horses' heads facing the exulting enemy.

"Charge!" shouted a voice, and without break or pause we thundered back, waving our swords and yelling, "*Vive le Roi!*"

It seemed a mad thing to do, but Turenne was with us, and Turenne was worth an army. Condé's troopers tried to gather themselves against the shock, but, confident of victory, they were riding in loose order, and we gave them no time to close their ranks. Crash! We went into them like a thunderbolt, and the bravest rebel there could not stand against the furious onslaught.

Turenne fought like an ordinary trooper, and as for Raoul, he outshone himself. I tried hard to keep up with him, but he outpaced me and every horseman in his squadron.

"*Vive le Roi!*" he shouted, and "*Vive le Roi!*" answered back his toiling troopers.

Once I lost sight of him in the press and feared he had gone down, but the next instant I heard his battle-cry again, and there he was, amidst a throng of foes on the very edge of the causeway. Another order from Turenne brought us to a halt, and we cheered frantically as the broken rebels crowded together in their efforts to escape.

Suddenly Turenne's plan was made clear. A noise of thunder broke on our ears; the air was filled with smoke and flame, the struggling horsemen were bowled over by the great iron balls from the battery. The causeway had become a lane of death; men and horses fell to the ground; the confusion grew terrible; Condé's splendid cavalry was a mere rabble, struggling and fighting to get clear of the awful passage. Those who succeeded in breaking through galloped off swiftly, but, when the gunners ceased their work of destruction, the lane was carpeted with the bodies of the dying and dead.

"Now, young sir," exclaimed Turenne, turning to me, "you may return and tell the Cardinal there is nothing to fear. The prince is thoroughly beaten and can attempt no more to-day. His Majesty can sleep in peace at Gien."

I would gladly have stayed longer, for Raoul was being carried off by some of his troopers, and I feared he was badly wounded. However, in the army one has to obey; so, gathering up my reins, I galloped back towards Gien, spreading the news of the victory on the way. In the town itself the crowds of frightened people thronged around me, pressing so closely that I could barely proceed at a walking pace.

"The news, monsieur?" they cried. "What of the battle? Has Condé won? Tell us what the prince is doing!"

Again and again I repeated that the prince was defeated, but they seemed not to understand, or understanding, not to believe. By slow degrees I reached Mazarin's apartments, and the Cardinal, agitated and almost trembling, advanced quickly to meet me.

"The news?" said he. "Is it good or ill?"

"Good, your Eminence," I answered, and at that he bade me accompany him into the presence of the boy-king and the Queen-Mother, to whom I repeated Turenne's message. Then they asked about the fight, and I, to the best of my ability, gave them a description of the battle.

"My son," said the Queen-Mother gravely, "you must be very grateful to Marshal Turenne. He has placed the crown a second time on your head."

As soon as I was dismissed from the royal presence I sought Pillot, and told him we must ride at once to Blenau to look for Raoul.

"M. Beauchamp wounded, monsieur? Is he hurt very much?"

"That is what I want to find out."

We were silent on the journey; I was greatly troubled about Raoul, and the dwarf did not care to disturb my thoughts. We met some of the wounded being taken to Gien and Briare; others were at Blenau, and amongst these we found Raoul.

"M. Beauchamp?" said the surgeon to whom I spoke. "Yes, he is here, waiting to have his wounds dressed; he is a lucky fellow; there is nothing serious; he will return to Gien to-morrow. In less than a month he will be in the saddle again. You can see him if you wish."

Raoul's eyes flashed with pleasure at my approach. He was very pale from loss of blood, but was able to talk, and spoke hopefully of returning to duty in a few days. He did not tell me, however, what I afterwards learned from others, that the Marshal had paid him a visit and had spoken in the highest terms of his bravery.

As soon as his wounds were dressed and he was made comfortable I returned to Gien, in order to be at hand in case the Cardinal needed my services.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The King Visits Raoul.

I shall not soon forget the day the Court left Gien. Mazarin had kept me fully employed until a late hour on the previous evening, and directly after breakfast I went to spend a last five minutes with Raoul. Turenne had given orders that he should be well lodged, and the King's own surgeons had attended to dress his wounds. The news of his gallant exploit had quickly spread abroad, and numerous luxuries had been forwarded to the sick room from the royal table.

Happily his hurts were not serious, a gash across his sword-arm being the worst, but he could dress himself with the assistance of Pillot, whom I had sent to wait on him, though he had to let the right sleeve of his tunic hang empty. Pillot had finished dressing him when I entered, and Raoul exclaimed with a laugh, "I shall be sorry when you go, Albert; I shall lose an admirable valet."

"We move at once," I answered, "but Pillot will remain here till you can manage without his assistance. Is it not so, Pillot?"

"Certainly, monsieur, if M. Beauchamp permits."

"Why," exclaimed Raoul, smiling, "as to that I should be very pleased, but how will M. de Lalande manage?"

"Look after himself," said I. "The change will do me good; I have been growing lazy of late. Listen! What a hubbub in the street! Some one is coming up the stairs. Run to the door, Pillot, and see who our visitor is."

The dwarf had just crossed the room when there was a knock at the door, and an officer high in the royal household entered.

"M. Beauchamp," said he, glancing round with a smile, "I congratulate you on your good fortune. His most gracious Majesty is below, with Marshal Turenne, who has sung your praises so loudly that, before leaving Gien, His Majesty insisted on coming to visit you."

Never in all my life had I felt such a thrill of joy as at these words. The King was coming to visit Raoul! My heart beat fast at the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and I bubbled over with happy excitement as the famous soldier and the royal boy made their appearance.

"M. Beauchamp," exclaimed the Marshal, "His Majesty has heard of your brave deeds, and has done you the honour of paying you a visit before he leaves Gien."

Raoul bowed respectfully, speaking just the words required, and acting, in short, as a French gentleman should, who is honoured by his monarch's approval.

[Transcriber's note: illustration missing from book]

I watched the young King closely. He was a handsome lad, and, though not forgetting his regal dignity, he spoke from his heart with all a high-spirited boy's emotion.

"Monsieur," said he, "to the soldier honoured by the greatest general in Europe, a king's gift can have little value. Yet keep this in remembrance of this day, and if ever the need should arise for your monarch's favour, it shall prove a sure passport."

"Keep this in remembrance of this day."

"Keep this in remembrance of this day."

As he spoke he took a star set with brilliants from his own breast, and fastened it on Raoul's.

Bowing low, my comrade spoke his thanks like a gallant knight, and then the royal boy, flushing with pleasure at his own kindly act, and bidding Raoul recover his strength soon, took his departure, accompanied by the Marshal.

"Well done, Raoul!" I cried, "now your fortune is assured. That star will carry you to the very highest position in the days to come. I wish Humphreys had been here to share our pleasure."

"What is it?" cried a cheery voice from the door. "Do you know the King is in the street?"

"Yes," said I, pointing to the star on Raoul's breast, "he has been here, and that is what he has left behind."

"Hurrah!" cried the Englishman. "Bravo, Raoul! You deserve your luck if any one does."

"I owe the honour to Marshal Turenne's considerate kindness."

"And to something else! The Marshal doesn't escort young Louis round giving brilliants to every one who was in the battle! I suppose you have heard we are moving again? Condé has left his army and gone to Paris. I really believe the war will not last much longer."

"I hope not," said I heartily; "if it does, the country will be ruined completely."

"Condé and his friends are to blame for that. But I must be off now; I am baggage-minder-in-chief to the Court."

"It must be a terrible responsibility having to look after the ladies' dresses," laughed Raoul.

"Don't be in too great a hurry to take the field," advised Humphreys, as we wished him good-bye. "That is a nasty gash on the sword-arm, and will require some time to heal. Does Pillot stay behind? Ah! I congratulate you, Beauchamp; he is a capital nurse. See that M. Beauchamp is quite well before he leaves, Pillot."

"Monsieur will find that I shall do my best," exclaimed the little man, and then with a last farewell to Raoul, Humphreys and I took our departure.

Nothing of any consequence occurred during the next fortnight. The Court removed to St. Germain, and the army to Palisseau, but, beyond a skirmish or two, there was no fighting. As usual, however, there were plenty of rumours, and every man had a different story to relate of what was going on. As to Mazarin, he spent his days, and nights too, in writing and reading innumerable notes, and in interviewing mysterious people.

One evening, having for a wonder no duties to perform, I strolled over to the palace for a chat with Humphreys.

"Have you heard the latest news?" he asked, and, as I shook my head, added laughingly, "it is not a rumour but a fact. Turenne has doubled back on Etampes, and has shut up the bulk of the rebels there. It will be a grand stroke if he captures the town."

"Is Condé there?"

"I think not. Most accounts state that he is still in Paris. A lucky thing you took the ladies away; the city, according to some of the Queen's friends who have just crept out, is in a frightful state. The people are up in arms, and the mob is burning and plundering on all sides."

"What is the Duke of Orleans doing?"

"Making up his mind and altering it again; he has no leisure for anything else. Mazarin seems to have been busy lately."

"Spoiling paper! there will be soon none left in the kingdom. While Turenne is fighting, the Cardinal is driving bargains."

"Ah!" exclaimed my comrade scornfully, "the truth is, it is every man for himself and the country can go to the dogs."

About a week after this conversation with Humphreys, M. Belloc ordered me to be at the Cardinal's room at four o'clock the next morning.

"Have your horse ready, and in good trim, as I believe you have a long journey."

"Not as far as Bruhl, I hope?"

"No," said he with a smile; "I think none of us will need to return to Bruhl in a hurry, though it is difficult to prophesy. However, see to your horse, and then get off to bed. The Cardinal will expect you at the very second."

By this time I was well aware of Mazarin's crotchets, and took care to present myself at the proper time. His secretary opened the door, and admitted me into his master's room. Whether Mazarin ever went to bed at this period of his life I cannot say, but he always gave me the impression that he could live without sleep. There he was at four o'clock, in dressing gown and slippers, writing with no sign of weariness whatever.

"Is your horse saddled, M. de Lalande?" he asked, without stopping or taking his eyes from the paper.

"Yes, your Eminence."

"Very good. Here is a little document; put it away safely. It is for Marshal Turenne, and it must be given to him this evening. He is at Etampes, or rather in the neighbourhood. Do not lose the missive, though it is less important than some you have carried."

"Do I return at once, your Eminence?"

"That will depend on Marshal Turenne. You will place yourself under his orders. And now, a prosperous ride to you."

M. Belloc, who had placed my horse in care of a soldier, was waiting outside. He evidently knew the nature of my errand, and, as I mounted, wished me a quick and pleasant journey.

"The country is fairly clear," he said, "and there is not much chance of meeting with an

enemy. Still, it will be as well to keep your eyes open."

"I will," said I, thinking of my journey to Bruhl, and of the smooth-spoken Captain Courcy.

There was, however, little cause for alarm, the only soldiers I encountered being King's troops. At Limours, where I intended to stop for an hour or two, the inns were filled with them, and I found some difficulty in getting my horse stabled. The inn at which I at length stopped was the Golden Fleece, and even there every room was occupied.

"I am grieved," exclaimed the innkeeper, a portly man with rubicund face, "but monsieur can have a table for his refreshment, and he will not find the guests objectionable."

Opening a door, he ushered me into an apartment where three men sat. Two of them were evidently in company; the third, rather to my astonishment, was Pillot, who, glancing up at my entrance, rose to greet me.

"You have left Gien then?" I said. "Where is M. Beauchamp?"

"In the camp before Etampes, monsieur. He has recovered from his wounds, and has returned to his squadron. I offered to stay with him a while longer, but he preferred that I should join you."

"When did you leave him?"

"This morning, monsieur."

As there was no need to take Pillot with me, I ordered him to remain at the inn until my return, which would probably be the next day.

"Very well, monsieur," said he pleasantly.

As soon as my horse was sufficiently rested I resumed my journey, telling Pillot he might expect me at any hour of the day or night. I was sorry Raoul had left Gien, though pleased at the prospect of seeing him at Etampes, and, but for the strangeness attending our meeting, I should have entirely passed over the episode of this otherwise uneventful ride.

Marshal Turenne was inspecting the position of a battery when I found him, but he instantly opened and read the Cardinal's note.

"Hum!" said he, knitting his brows, "this is a serious matter, and requires thought. You will remain in the camp until I am ready to furnish his Eminence with an answer. You have friends among my gentlemen?"

"M. Beauchamp is my chief friend, general."

"Ah! I remember you now. I saw you at Blenau and again at Gien. Well, you cannot do better than spend an hour or two with M. Beauchamp," and he directed one of his attendants to conduct me to Raoul's tent.

"Albert!" exclaimed my comrade, jumping up in surprise. "How came you here? Ah! I forgot! You are on the Cardinal's business?"

"Yes, but I met Pillot at Limours, and he told me you had rejoined your squadron. I hope you did not leave Gien too soon?"

"No, I am quite strong again, and I could not lie there doing nothing."

Now, I do not pretend to explain his behaviour at that time, or the mystery which followed; my readers must judge for themselves after I have stated the facts. That something had altered my old comrade very much was plain. He had lost his high spirits, and replied to my sallies with only a half-hearted smile. When I rallied him on this gloomy fit he dismissed the subject hastily, leading me to talk of John Humphreys and what the Court was doing at St. Germain.

I had been with him an hour or a little more when an officer brought word that Marshal Turenne desired to see M. Beauchamp immediately.

"Stay where you are, Albert, and make yourself comfortable," he exclaimed. "It is an order for some piece of special service perhaps; the Marshal is always planning a fresh surprise."

Left alone, I began wondering more than ever at the remarkable change which had come over him. He was as keen as ever to perform his duties, but the quick, bright smile, the joyous laugh, the old boyish merriment had vanished.

"He is weak from his wounds," I thought; "he should have stayed longer at Gien, and let Pillot nurse him. Perhaps he will throw off this gloomy air as he gets stronger."

At the end of half-an-hour he returned, and I concluded by his manner that the Marshal had entrusted him with some important business.

"Another expedition," I said, springing up. "Take care, Raoul, the pitcher may go to the well once too often."

"It matters little, dear friend, but at present there is no need for alarm. Do you know what was in that packet from the Cardinal? Condé has won over the Duke of Lorraine, who is marching on Paris with a large army. Turenne intends to break up his camp and attack the Duke."

"That will be awkward; we shall be placed between two fires."

"Trust to Turenne; he understands his business. A few troops will stay here for a day or two. Meanwhile, we march light; we shall strike our blow at Lorraine, and then the rest of our army will rejoin us."

"Leaving Condé's troops to slip out of Etampes!"

"So much the better; they will be compelled to fight in the open."

"Are you riding with the Marshal?"

"In front of him. He has selected my squadron to scour the country in advance. It will be a change from camp life. Now, I must go; we shall meet again soon."

"I hope so!"

"It is certain," he answered calmly, "the stars have foretold it."

I looked at him in surprise, and said, "You were not used to put your faith in the stars, Raoul!"

"No," he answered, dreamily, "but I have learned much of late. Do you remember the open space before the Porte St. Antoine? It is there we shall meet. I hear the roar of cannon, the rattle of muskets, the hoof-beats of horses, the fierce shouts of struggling men. I see—— Ah well, dear friend, it is not long to wait!"

I tried to detain him, to make him speak more plainly, but he would say nothing further, and, leaving the tent, we walked in silence to the lines farthest from Etampes. Raoul's horsemen were already there, and presently Turenne himself, attended by two officers, rode up. In a few stirring words he addressed the troopers, bidding them justify his choice, and speaking in high terms of their young leader. Then he gave Raoul his final instructions, and my friend pressed my hand in a last grasp.

"*Au revoir!*" said he quietly. "Remember the Porte St. Antoine!"

I stood for a while watching the weird scene as the troopers filed off silently, and in perfect order. Raoul, who had placed himself at their head, was soon out of sight, but I could not banish his strange words from my mind.

"Remember the Porte St. Antoine!" What did he mean? Why had he mentioned that particular spot as the scene of our meeting? What was the strange vision at which he had hinted? Alas! I understood later, but even to this day the manner of his foreknowledge remains a mystery.

"Is that M. de Lalande?"

Starting from my dream, I found it was Marshal Turenne who addressed me, and saluting, I answered his question.

"Come to me at daybreak," he said; "I wish to send a letter by you to Cardinal Mazarin," and he galloped off, the two officers following.

Returning to Raoul's tent—for the troopers had left every thing standing—I lay down, and tried, though unsuccessfully, to sleep. My comrade's mysterious speech haunted me; I could make nothing of it, and it was with a feeling of relief that I saw the day open. Having groomed and fed my horse, I went to the Marshal's tent. The famous soldier had the note written, but he made me stay while his servant prepared a simple breakfast, to which we both sat down. Then, sending a man for my horse, he wished me a safe journey, and I rode from the camp as the troops began to stir.

Pillot was waiting for me at Etampes, and I questioned him closely concerning Raoul.

"It is true that M. Beauchamp has changed much," said he; "I noticed it at Gien."

"Was there any reason for it?"

"Ah, monsieur, it is hard to tell. For a week after you left Gien, M. Beauchamp was bright and cheerful as usual, and planning great things for you and himself. Then, one evening, on going to his room, I found him lying down, fully dressed. He seemed to be asleep."

"Seemed to be?" I interrupted crossly, "could you not make sure?"

"He did not hear me, monsieur, and he did not answer when I spoke, but his eyes were open

and bright. Presently, as I stood in a corner of the room, he began talking as if to some person. Then suddenly he sprang up, his face was white, and his eyes stared as if they had seen something dreadful, and he trembled all over. I called his name, and he glanced round in a frightened way as if surprised to find himself in a room."

"Did he make any remark?"

"He said he had been dreaming, and made me take him into the street to clear the cobwebs from his brain. I think the same dream came again afterwards, but he would not speak of it, though once I heard him mutter to himself, 'It was the Porte St. Antoine!'"

"The Porte St. Antoine?" I cried, more astonished than ever; "that is where he declared I should meet him next!"

"There are many strange things for which we cannot account, monsieur!" exclaimed Pillot—a remark which, though true enough, gave me small comfort.

The little man did his best to cheer me, but it was a dreary ride notwithstanding, and he must have been glad when towards evening we reached St. Germain. Having given Mazarin the Marshal's note, and finding the time at my own disposal, I went to seek Humphreys.

"Well, my friend, so you have returned," exclaimed the jovial Englishman. "You look tired and troubled. Is anything wrong?"

"I have seen Raoul."

"That should not have depressed you! So he is back with the army? I thought he would not stay quiet long."

"It is on Raoul's account I am uneasy," I replied, and without more ado, described the change that had come over him, and repeated his mysterious words.

"A bagatelle!" declared Humphreys, "a mere trifle! He has been moping, and has got queer fancies into his head; sick people often do. Think no more of it, that is my advice; in a week he will be laughing at his dreams. The jingle of spurs and the blare of trumpets will soon drive away those notions."

"I am not so certain of that, my friend. Besides, he is not suffering from his wound now; he has recovered his strength."

"Of body, I grant you; and when his mind becomes clearer, these whimseys will vanish like ghosts at cock-crow."

The Englishman seemed so sure, and spoke so confidently, that while in his company I felt half inclined to smile at my childish ideas; but later, in the solitude of my own room, they did not appear so childish. The notion that Raoul was in some danger had disturbed my brain, and several times during the night I awoke with a start, fancying I heard him call my name.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Remember the Porte St. Antoine."

It was, perhaps, fortunate that about this time Mazarin kept me very busy. Events moved quickly; the situation changed every day; no one knew at one hour what would happen the next. The Cardinal remained with the Court, but I spent most of my time on horseback, galloping with hastily written letters from one leader to another.

One day I was sent to Villeneuve St. Georges, where Turenne, having made a daring march, had just arrived. The Marshal was in a position of extreme danger. Lorraine was in front of him with a large army; Condé's troops were approaching swiftly from Etampes. There was an even greater peril, of which, however, I had no idea, till the famous soldier had read Mazarin's note.

"Here is news," said he, speaking to an officer of high rank; "Condé has left Paris and has joined his troops. We must settle this affair soon, or the prince will be too quick for us."

He possessed the highest respect for Condé as a soldier, and the prince on his part regarded Turenne as the only enemy to be feared. These two were, in fact, the most celebrated generals in Europe, and it was a thousand pities for France that their swords were not pointed against a common enemy.

"Let us see what the Cardinal offers," he continued, proceeding to read Mazarin's note.

"Hum! Lorraine won't accept those terms, unless I back them up by a show of bayonets. Yet he must be got rid of! We can't fight both him and Condé at the same time."

Presently turning to me he said, "Ride back to St. Germain, De Lalande, and inform the Cardinal that I will send a messenger within twenty-four hours. By then Lorraine will be in full retreat or His Majesty will be minus an army."

Before leaving the camp I endeavoured to find Raoul, but without success. Several officers informed me that he was rarely with the main body, his troopers being chiefly used for scouting purposes. This was disappointing; so, as there was clearly no chance of meeting him, I returned to St. Germain and delivered my message.

How he managed it I cannot explain—some people hinted that Mazarin's craft had most to do with it—but Turenne was as good as his word, and the next evening an officer from his army galloped into St. Germain with the information that, without striking a blow, Lorraine had broken up his camp and was retreating to Flanders. Mazarin rubbed his hands at the news, and purred softly, as he usually did when well pleased.

"We are getting on, gentlemen!" said he. "Before long His Majesty will be in his capital again."

In this the Cardinal was mistaken, but every day still further improved our position. The Court removed to St. Denis; Condé, who had posted his troops on the bank of the Seine, near St. Cloud, was being pressed day and night by Turenne, and was at length forced to retreat in the direction of Charenton.

As soon as this became known in St. Denis the utmost excitement prevailed, and every one began asking what the people of Paris would do. Unless the gates of the city were opened the prince must either win a brilliant victory or be crushed. On this point Mazarin spoke very sensibly.

"Everything depends on the result of the first stroke," said he. "The Duke of Orleans is in command of the town. He will blow hot and cold after his manner: Condé will ask for shelter, and Gaston will hesitate. There lies our chance. If we can catch and beat the prince meanwhile, all will go well; Gaston ever leans to the strongest side."

Turenne, who had come to consult with the Cardinal, smiled grimly.

"Take His Majesty to Charonne," he advised, "and bid him write a letter with his own hand to the Council, forbidding the gates to be opened. It may do good: it cannot do harm."

"And meanwhile?" asked Mazarin.

"My cavaliers are hot on the prince's track. I have ordered La Ferté to cross the river with his artillery, and Condé must either surrender or accept battle at St. Antoine."

"Remember the Porte St. Antoine!" The words sounded in my ears so clearly that it almost seemed as if I heard Raoul speaking.

"The Court will be in no danger," Turenne continued, "but I shall require every man who can use a sword or fire a musket. Have you ever seen a wild boar at bay? That is how Condé fights. I shall beat him, but the pack will be badly mauled. Gentlemen, who will ride with Turenne, and die with Turenne, if needs be, for the honour of France?"

There were a dozen of us, all belonging to Mazarin's body-guard, at the lower end of the room, and instantly every sword leaped from its scabbard and flashed in the air.

"I! I! I!" we shouted like a number of enthusiastic boys, and the famous general laughed genially.

No one, I fear, waited for the Cardinal's consent, and when, a few minutes later, Turenne mounted his horse, fifty headstrong cavaliers fell in joyously behind him.

"For the King! gentlemen," cried he. "For the King!" we echoed loyally, and the royal boy, with flushed cheeks and gleaming eyes, came in person to bid us farewell.

"I thank you, gentlemen, all," said he, and there was a curious catch in his voice. "I would I were riding in your ranks, but while the King has such loyal servants France need fear no rebels. I wish you success, gentlemen, you and your gallant leader."

At this, waving our plumed hats high, we cheered again and swept forward with a rush. From the Faubourg St. Denis came the sounds of musketry, of wild battle shouts, and cries of triumph and despair.

"Forward!" cried Turenne. "Forward!"

Riding with loose reins we spurred hard to the scene of conflict, just in time to see the backs of Condé's rearguard. The gallant fellows had fought stubbornly, contesting every foot of ground,

and sacrificing themselves in order to delay our advance. Now, however, they were in retreat, and Turenne, leaving his victorious infantry to re-form, collected his horsemen and pressed on in pursuit.

Among the foremost rode my old comrade, and my heart beat fast at sight of him. His head was bare, his long fair curls fell about his shoulders, his cheeks were flushed, his eyes fiercely bright. I had never seen him in such a state of intense excitement. As I joined him he greeted me with a forced smile, but there was no time for speech. Side by side we dashed through the streets into the Faubourg St. Martin. Here several squadrons of Condé's cavalry barred our way, but Raoul halted not.

"For the King!" he cried, waving his sword. "For the King!" as we leaped at the horsemen, while our comrades, answering with a lusty shout, galloped madly behind us.

Crash! We were in the midst of the throng, cutting, thrusting, parrying, pressing the rebels back slowly. They fought well, as became Frenchmen, but we were too many, and at last they broke.

"Forward!" cried Raoul, who was still in front, but Turenne called us back.

"Softly, softly," exclaimed our leader; "a few hundred horsemen cannot defeat an army in position. We must go slowly for a while. The enemy are entrenched behind barricades in the Faubourg St. Antoine."

Raoul looked at me meaningly, and I became unnerved by the odd coincidence. Was it chance or fate?

"Together till the end," he whispered. "Do not grieve for me, dear friend, it is written in the stars, and I am content."

I tried to reply, but my lips were dumb; I could only press his hand in silence.

Like a wise general Condé was meanwhile seizing and strengthening every defensible post. His men pierced the houses for musketry, raised new obstacles everywhere, heightened the barricades, and dragged the big guns into the open space. Every moment's delay on our part rendered the position more formidable, and we listened anxiously for the tramp, tramp, of our brave infantry.

"Can't we take the place at a rush?" asked one man impetuously, and Raoul looked at him with a smile.

"You do not know the Faubourg St. Antoine," said he; "I do. I was here when Lorraine's troops put up the barricades. Even with our infantry we shall be too weak to force a passage."

"Bah!" cried a listener impatiently, "there are three broad streets leading to the gate, and we can have our choice of them. Then Condé will be cornered."

"Every house is a fortress," said Raoul, "and a dozen narrow streets lead into each avenue. Turenne will attack when the infantry arrives, but with any other general I should call it madness to move without La Ferté's artillery."

My comrade's reputation for reckless bravery was so well established that his words produced some impression, though it was tantalising to wait there while the enemy worked with all their might to render the Faubourg impregnable. Presently, a thundering cheer announced the arrival of our infantry, and we looked anxiously at Turenne to discover if he would risk the hazard of the die. A very rash general would have flung us at the barricades without a thought; a weak one would have hesitated too long; what would Turenne do?

Sitting his horse calmly at the head of his troops, he summoned his principal officers around him, and explained his intentions. We could only guess at his words, but very soon the group broke up, the officers galloped to their stations, commands were issued: first one section, then another of the troops moved slowly forward, and we became aware that Turenne had resolved to attack without waiting for his artillery.

It has been mentioned that three principal streets led to the open space before the gate, and along these avenues of death we fought our way in three divisions. Raoul and I accompanied Turenne in the centre. Foot by foot, almost inch by inch, we advanced beneath a hail of bullets. Men fell fast, but the survivors struggled on undauntedly. From every window sped the leaden messengers into our midst; from behind each barricade flashed a flame of fire.

"The houses must be cleared!" exclaimed the general. "Let the musketeers clear them one by one!" and he ordered us to seek shelter, though he himself continued in the open, coolly directing the operations.

With fierce cries the musketeers swarmed into the buildings, and at the point of the bayonet drove the enemy from room to room, slaying all those who refused to surrender. I had thought the fight on the plain of Blenau terrible, but it was child's play to this. Stoutly and gallantly the

rebels fought, but one by one the houses fell into our hands; the barricades were torn down, and again the signal sounded for the cavalry to advance.

Alas! Already many of the gay gentlemen who had ridden so joyously through St. Martin had fallen; but there was no time to mourn their loss. Turenne was in front, and the folds of the King's banner, shot-torn and blackened, were fluttering in the breeze. In after years our gracious monarch's colours were borne in many a hot encounter, but never, I think, in a more desperate fray than the struggle at St. Antoine, between—shame on those who made it possible—Frenchmen and Frenchmen.

No war is good to look upon in cold blood, when the lust of battle has died away, but a cruel fight between men of the same blood and race is abominable. Yet, on that day, I question if it made any of us more gentle to know that our enemies were Frenchmen.

"Forward!" cried our chief, and with a rush we swept the street from end to end, crying, "*Vive le Roi!*" as if victory were already won.

Then, suddenly, the roar of the guns greeted us, and, under cover of the smoke, Condé leaped into our midst at the head of his household troops. From the first I have maintained that the prince did France a foul wrong in setting himself against his rightful monarch, but it cannot be denied that he was a splendid soldier. With his war-cry ringing high and clear above the tumult he came at us; the fight grew terrible; our infantry, unable to avoid the horses, fell back in confusion, leaving a scattered handful of cavaliers to continue the contest alone. Seeing his advantage, the prince flung every available horseman at us, and, though fighting desperately, we were driven back by force of numbers.

Again and again we returned to the charge, and many gallant feats of arms were performed, but victory appeared hopeless, and we listened anxiously for the sound of La Ferté's cannon. Thus far, at least, Raoul's judgment had proved correct. Ill news came both from right and left. Our men, suffering fearfully from the hidden musketry fire, made headway only at a wasteful expense of life. More than one high officer had fallen at the barricades, and Condé, who seemed to be in several places at once, beat back each fresh assault.

Everywhere our soldiers were growing dispirited, and even talked of waiting for help; but Turenne, who had an iron will, would not hear of defeat. Rising in his stirrups, and looking steadily at his band of cavaliers, he cried cheerfully, "One more charge, gentlemen!"

"For the King!" answered Raoul, waving his stained sword above his head, and we all echoed the cry lustily.

Turenne gave the word, and once again we swept like a hurricane through the street. The rebels awaited the onset, but the shock was too great. Back they went, steadily at first, then swiftly, and at last in headlong flight. Condé, brave as a lion—to my thinking no braver man took part in the fight—endeavoured in vain to rally them; only his staunchest leaders stayed at his side. Raoul, a horse's length in front of us, galloped forward, and struck furiously at the rebel chief. The blow partly missed, but the sword drew blood.

"For the King!" shouted my comrade.

"Down with Mazarin!" responded our opponents defiantly, and surrounding Condé forced him against his will to retire.

Meanwhile our musketeers, swarming into the houses, maintained an incessant and destructive fire, The rebels in their turn lost heart, and even their leader's matchless courage could hardly keep them at their posts. A cheer on the right announced our success in that quarter, and presently arose an answering cry from the left. The three divisions had fought their way to the open space, and unless the Parisians unbolted the gate the rebel army was doomed. Paris was at their backs, we were in front, and they could not break through us.

A band of their leaders held the last barricade with heroic courage. Separated from all their friends, they were in desperate plight; yet they blenched not. One after another they fell grievously wounded, and some among them bore the highest names in France. It was a pitiful sight, yet they refused to surrender, though Turenne, I am certain, would gladly have spared them. Presently Condé, who had meanwhile been endeavouring to stem the tide of battle elsewhere, observed their plight, and, collecting a band of devoted adherents, made a gallant attempt at rescue.

Raoul, evidently thinking this a fine opportunity to seize the prince, spurred into the open; I raced after him quickly, others followed, and crying, "Down with Condé!" charged in a body at the princely rebel.

While some of his friends rescued the survivors at the barricade, the others rode in our direction. With a ringing cheer we sprang at them, struck out furiously right and left, spurred our horses into the throng, pierced it in every direction, till finally it fell apart. Disdaining meaner foes, Raoul rode at the prince, engaging him in deadly combat. He still wore the King's gift on his breast, and fought as if he were the monarch's sole champion. Whether he was Condé's equal in swordsmanship I cannot say, but he kept the prince well employed.

Suddenly, as they fought, the roar of La Ferté's guns broke out, and we had the enemy at our mercy. Condé, as if recognising this, began to withdraw, and Raoul was pressing on more vigorously when a rebel horseman, spurring toward the gate, cut him down. I saw the tragedy distinctly, but could do no more than utter a warning cry, which, alas, my comrade did not hear.

How the Parisians by opening the gate and letting the rebels through robbed us of victory, the world knows, but at the moment I cared little. All my hopes and fears were centred in Raoul, and, heedless of the dropping bullets, I rode across to the spot where he lay. He was in terrible pain, stricken I feared unto death, but his wonderful courage remained unbroken, and he did not even murmur when, with the assistance of some trusty comrades, I carried him to one of the empty houses.

The fight was over now; Condé's troops had escaped into the city; the sullen roar of the guns died away; men thought only of succouring the wounded who dotted the ground in large numbers. A kindly surgeon, hearing of Raoul's plight, hurried to the room where we had placed him, but at the first glance he shook his head sorrowfully, and I knew there was no hope.

"An hour, or two at the most," he whispered to me. "The best physician in France could do no more than ease his pain."

He did what he could and went his way, for there were many who needed his services; the soldiers, too, had departed, and I alone remained to watch my friend die. Very still, and with closed eyes he lay, but his breathing was laboured, and from time to time a hoarse rattle sounded in his throat. Presently his eyes opened, and he looked at me with a faint smile. Then pointing to the King's star, he whispered, "For Marie," and I, not trusting myself to speak, bowed my head.

"True friend," said he softly, "ever loyal! Do not grieve, Albert; it must be for the best. I am happy, quite happy. Let me clasp your hand. Ah, heaven was good in giving me such a friend!"

His voice became more and more broken; the last sentence I could understand only by following closely the movements of his lips. What could I say? I could not bid him hope; we both knew he was dying, and that, in fact, his very moments were numbered. So I sat there in the gathering gloom, holding his hand, and at intervals wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

He spoke again, but now his mind wandered, and his thoughts drifted back to the happy days of our youth. He recalled past events, smiling or frowning as they pleased or angered him in the days gone by. Then for a time he lay still, but suddenly, as if coming to his senses, he looked up straight into my face.

"Good-bye," he murmured. "Tell Marie. The open space—the guns and the hoof-beats. Strange, strange!"

And that was the end of it! Raoul was dead! How I mourned for him none can ever know: it is not seemly to lay bare the inmost secrets of our hearts to the gaze of curious eyes.

Raoul was dead, and on the very threshold of life.

We took him to St. Denis with many another gallant cavalier who had ridden out joyously to the fight with the cry of "For the King!" on his lips. The monks buried him in a plot of consecrated ground without the monastery walls, and Turenne, who recognised his worth, attended the funeral. Stalwart John Humphreys, who had been chosen to guard the young King, was there also. He had loved the dead man dearly, and though he could say nothing to lessen my bitter grief, yet somehow his presence comforted me.

The next day I despatched Pillot with the star and a letter to Aunay, paid a farewell visit to Raoul's grave, and before the sun had gained his full power was riding sword in hand at Turenne's side. For in warfare action alone must be the solace for one's private griefs.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Mazarin Triumphant.

Of my life during the next few months there is little to tell, beyond the ordinary perils of a soldier's career. I carried the green scarf of Mazarin into several desperate battles, and stained my sword at the taking of more than one hostile town. I marched and fought, was wounded and got well again, was complimented by Turenne and rewarded by the Queen-Regent. In fine, I figured as a successful soldier as far as my youth permitted.

Fortune favoured me, as the jade often does those who care nothing for her frowns or smiles, and in the affair at Brie Comte Robert, when the Court was once more in danger, I distinguished myself sufficiently to be thanked by our youthful monarch in person.

But the praises and rewards showered upon me were not honestly earned, for my deeds were due to recklessness rather than to true bravery. Day and night I was ready to take my life in my hands, and I lived in a whirl of excitement. I made no new friends, though many dashing spirits offered me comradeship. My heart was still sore for the loss of Raoul, and except for Pillot and the sturdy Englishman, John Humphreys, I went my way alone.

While at Pontoise I saw much of Humphreys, who, in his bluff hearty way, did a good deal to cheer me. He talked freely of Raoul, and I liked to listen to his praises of my dead friend. However, the fortune of war was soon to cut me adrift from him. Things were going very badly for us just at that time, and Turenne could barely hold his own. The Duke of Lorraine had returned to help Condé, and the Spanish general, Fuensaldaña, was hurrying with a strong army to the Duke's side.

"The Cardinal has played a clever game," remarked Pillot, one evening, "but he has lost now. I heard it whispered this afternoon that he is likely to take another journey."

"The Queen will not desert him," said I.

"She cannot help herself, monsieur. Even her strongest friends are clamouring for the Cardinal's dismissal."

The next day I found that Pillot was right, and it was from Humphreys I heard it.

"The matter has been all arranged," said he. "The King is to be asked to dismiss Mazarin, and he will agree. When that is done, it is thought the princes will lay down their arms."

"And if not?"

"The fighting will continue, I suppose. But even Turenne will not be able to defeat Condé and Lorraine and the Spaniards. They are too many for him."

"He will do his best."

"I grant you that, but even Turenne cannot accomplish impossibilities."

This was almost the last chat I had with Humphreys for several months. Things turned out as he had prophesied. Mazarin quitted the Court, and I accompanied him on the journey to Sedan. For a beaten man he was very cheerful, and I felt sure that, even then, he was reckoning on a triumphant return.

"This travelling is troublesome, De Lalande," said he, pleasantly, "but I have no doubt we shall find rest after a while."

Now, although I served him faithfully and to the best of my ability, the Cardinal was no favourite of mine, yet I found it impossible not to admire him. My old idea of the huge spider returned to me in stronger force. He was always spinning, and with patience almost incredible. Now a thread was broken, now several; sometimes it seemed as if the web were entirely destroyed; yet still he persevered, never disheartened, never discouraged, never once, as far as I could judge, losing hope.

Couriers from the Court followed us on every stage, bringing countless letters and messages, and Mazarin was always ready to send back instructions or advice. He would write a despatch at two in the morning as cheerfully as at ten, and the worst tidings found him cool and collected. Even Pillot began to admire the man, though the poor fellow was in despair at being taken farther and farther away from his beloved Paris. He did not grumble, save in a comical manner, but his long absence from the capital was undoubtedly a sore trial to him.

One evening—we were entering Soissons, if my memory serves me—a messenger galloped up in hot haste, and delivered a letter to the Cardinal, who was, at the moment, on horseback. He read it through, and turning to the courier, said calmly, "Tell the Marshal there is no need for alarm; I will find a plan."

During the remainder of the journey he rode in deep thought, but on reaching the house where he was to stay for the night, he said, with a smile, "De Lalande, I have yet another piece of work for you. Come to me in the morning as soon as you have breakfasted."

I saluted, and, turning away, ordered Pillot to see that the horses were ready early, as we might have a long journey the next day.

"Perhaps it is to Paris, monsieur," he suggested, his eyes sparkling. "I wonder if we could find our way to the inn in the Rue de Roi? I fear not. It is so long since we were there. The citizens will take me for a peasant!"

"Hardly that!" I answered laughing. "But why do you think we may go to Paris?"

"I do not know," said he comically, "perhaps because I hoped it might be so."

Poor Pillot was fated to be disappointed, as I discovered in the morning. Mazarin had

apparently been up for hours when I entered his room. His table was littered with papers and letters, one of which was addressed to the Duke of Lorraine.

"De Lalande," said he without ceremony, "how would you like to be captured by the Spaniards?"

"Captured by the Spaniards, my Lord?"

"Why, yes," said he, "it does not sound pleasant, but I fear that is what will happen to you. This letter is addressed to the Duke of Lorraine, but it is really meant to fall into the hands of the Spanish general."

"I understand, my Lord," I replied, though not with any degree of truth.

"Hardly, De Lalande," said he lightly, "but I will make it clear to you. Marshal Turenne has too many foes, and if we can induce Fuensaldaña to retreat, it will be a point in our favour. Should this letter fall into his hands he will decide to go, but the affair requires caution. That is why I have selected you. The Spaniards are near Compiègne, and I want you to be taken prisoner as soon as possible."

"I will do my best, my Lord, though it is a queer errand," I replied as I took my leave.

"*Parbleu!* this Cardinal is a cunning fox," exclaimed Pillot, when I informed him of the kind of adventure in which we were engaged. "The Spaniards will think Lorraine is making friends with the Court; they will take fright and decamp. Truly this Mazarin is a shrewd rascal. But," he added more soberly, "the affair will be awkward for monsieur."

"Why, yes; it will not be altogether pleasant," I replied, "but the Spaniards will soon release me."

Mounting our horses, we rode off, and by early evening had reached the neighbourhood of the Spanish camp.

"Monsieur will soon have his wish," whispered Pillot, as we proceeded through a small hamlet. "See, the road yonder is blocked by a body of horsemen. Does monsieur intend to show fight?"

"Why, no; yet I must not be caught too easily, or I shall arouse suspicion. Let us ride on carelessly, and turn when it is just too late."

"Monsieur may get a bullet," suggested Pillot, but I told him I must chance that, though he was, on no account, to risk his own life.

Accordingly we proceeded along the road toward the Spanish outpost, when suddenly a gruff voice roared some words in a foreign tongue. I have often laughed since at the remembrance of Pillot's face at this time. The fellow was a born actor and might have made a fortune on the stage. Now, his eyes rolled in fright, he was the very picture of misery, and he cried in trembling accents, "Fly, monsieur, fly, or we are dead men! Oh, good people, I pray you, do not hurt us. I will give you five pistoles—ten even——"

"Be still!" I exclaimed roughly, "what a coward you are!"

Again the gruff voice sounded, and just as I turned my horse's head, a dozen men, or more, came rushing up, while some one shouted in bad French, "Halt, or we fire!"

Pillot gave a scream of fright and jumped down, while I galloped off. The ride was not a long one, however, for my horse had scarcely got into his stride when a bullet struck him and he rolled over, pinning my leg to the ground. In an instant the soldiers were around me, and Pillot was crying fearfully, "Do not kill him, good people. He is a high officer and a friend of the King's. He is on an errand for His Majesty now. Oh, I will give you five, ten pistoles, and——"

"Cease that noise and answer my questions," exclaimed some one in French. "Who is your master, and where is he going?"

I did not hear Pillot's reply. My leg had been released, but the pain caused me to faint, and several days passed before I was able to understand what had happened. Then I found myself in a bed in a small chamber, with Pillot waiting upon me. He would not talk much at first, but after a time he recounted in high glee how the soldiers had discovered Mazarin's note, and how the Spanish general had almost immediately broken up the camp and withdrawn the greater part of his troops.

"And where are we now?" I asked.

"In Compiègne, monsieur. The surgeon says you will not be fit for the field for months, but in a fortnight or so I am going to take you in a carriage to Paris," and his face beamed with delight.

"I wonder if the Cardinal knows what happened?"

"Yes, monsieur. I sent him word by a trusty courier. Monsieur should be made a nobleman."

I did not wish that, but I was gratified when, on the very day before setting out for Paris, a special courier brought me this note, written by the Cardinal himself:

"Well done, De Lalande! Get well soon. Your services will not be forgotten."

My leg was still painful, and I could not use it at all, but Pillot had hired a roomy carriage, and fitted it up with soft cushions. Indeed, his thoughtfulness was remarkable, and he treated me with as much care as if I had been a child. We did the journey by easy stages, and I at length found myself back in my old rooms.

The surgeon whom Pillot now called in gave me small hope of a speedy recovery, and as a matter of fact I did not leave the house till the beginning of the new year. Before that time, however, many changes occurred. Condé marched south with his troops and the Court returned to Paris. This was a pleasant change, as John Humphreys was once more at the Louvre, and hardly a day passed without his spending an hour or so with me.

Naturally, he brought all the news; so that I could easily follow the course of events. Day by day the Royal power increased; the people were becoming fond of their youthful monarch, and Turenne was more than holding his own against the rebels.

"Faith!" exclaimed Humphreys, one evening towards the close of the year, "it looks as if that Cardinal of yours were going to win, after all. He is back in France with an army, and is hurrying to meet the Marshal!"

"He will be in Paris before long," said I laughing, "and then we shall see a sight."

Every day now brought news of some fresh success, and much of the glory fell to the share of Mazarin. People began to talk of him as a great general, and to compare him, as a soldier, with Condé and Turenne. This was, of course, very absurd, but the talk increased the Cardinal's popularity.

At the beginning of the new year, 1653, my leg was so much stronger that I was able to go out, and every day I walked a little distance in the streets, accompanied by Pillot. I could not ride as yet, but even that I was able to manage by the time Mazarin returned to Paris.

Yes, the great struggle was over, and, as I had foreseen in the beginning, the *Frondeurs* had been smitten hip and thigh. Condé, overshadowed by the genius of Turenne, was a fugitive; Gaston of Orleans, who ever blew hot and cold in one breath, had left the capital in disgrace; the parliament men had been brought to their knees; and that sturdy rogue, De Retz, having lost all his power, was openly arrested and imprisoned at Vincennes.

But the crowning triumph was the return, on 2nd February, of my early patron to the city which had hounded him out with hoots and jeers and savage threats of death. The streets were gaily decorated, and the citizens, apparently all of one mind, held high holiday in favour of the recalled exile.

I listened in vain for the ribald songs, the biting jests, the terrible threats and vows of vengeance; in their stead I heard praises of the Queen-Mother; openly expressed admiration of the youthful monarch, who has, since then, advanced his country to the highest pinnacle of fame; and words of good-will towards the wily Italian, who, whatever his defects, had toiled hard and successfully for France.

"The people are like dolls that jump when the showman pulls the strings," remarked Pillot, as we made our way through the throng.

But if the common people bawled themselves hoarse in welcoming the man they had more than once threatened to murder, the higher classes tripped each other up in their eagerness to render him homage. Louis himself rode in state six miles from the city to greet him, and the proudest nobles in the land were glad to appear in the Cardinal's train. The Royal Guard was mounted at the gate in his honour, and thousands welcomed, with joyful shouts, the Italian priest who had returned to govern their country as a master.

The *Black Mantles* and the clergy, the cadets of illustrious houses, the inferior nobles, and those who had raised themselves within an ace of princely rank, nay, even princes of the blood royal, bent the knee to this man against whom all France had pitted itself in vain! The triumph, indeed, was such as falls to the lot of few men, and it must be said that Mazarin bore his honours well. Many enemies who had insulted or injured him were in his power, but he took no vengeance, bidding them live at peace and devote their talents to the advancement of their country.

For my own part I had no cause to complain. On the very day after his arrival he sent for me to attend him in his apartments at the Louvre.

"Well, De Lalande," said he smiling, "so we are back in our old quarters! Have you recovered from your accident?"

"Yes, my Lord, I thank you."

"You are not looking well; you must go away for a change! Let me see, did we not have a talk once about a place called Vançey?"

"That was my father's estate, my Lord."

"Ah, and then it passed into the hands of Baron Maubranne? Your father, if I remember rightly, offended Cardinal Richelieu? Strange, that the father should anger one cardinal and the son gain the goodwill of another! Now, listen to me, De Lalande. Go home and rest, and tell your parents that the title-deeds of Vançey are following you."

"My Lord!" I gasped.

"There are those who call Mazarin a niggard," said he, still smiling, "but there will be at least one to hold him a good paymaster. You have done your share, De Lalande, and now I will do mine. There, go now; you must be anxious to see your parents. Some day I may need your services again."

* * * * *

I suppose that the story of my adventures really ends with my dismissal from the Cardinal's room, but there are a few matters on which my readers may like a little further information.

I need not dwell on my reception at home; of my father's pride, of my mother's unfeigned joy as she kissed and embraced me; nor is it necessary to add that the Cardinal was as good as his word, and that Vançey has long since been once again in the possession of the De Lalandes. I may, however, say a word or two about those whose acquaintance I made during that stirring period of my life.

Lautrec, of the gorgeous attire, followed the fortunes of Condé and was slain outside Bordeaux. Young Armand d'Arçy clung to the weak Gaston of Orleans and left Paris with the disgraced Duke. He was one of the first to congratulate me on my success, though he would never bow the knee to Mazarin. John Humphreys fought his way to a high rank in the Queen's Guards, and might have gained even further honours, but, in 1660, he returned to England with King Charles, and had his rich estates restored to him.

My old friend, Roland Belloc, had deservedly gained the King's favour, and spent several happy years as the youthful monarch's personal attendant, instructing him in the art of horsemanship and in the use of a soldier's weapons. Afterwards he retired on an ample pension to his country seat, and frequently paid a visit to Vançey, where he was always sure of a cordial welcome.

The unlucky Peleton never left the Bastille. Harassed by his own difficulties, Condé had forgotten his prisoner, who remained in his cell until released by a merciful death.

As for Pillot, I tried hard to induce him to stay at Vançey, but he could not tear himself from his beloved Paris; so I set aside for him a sum of money on which he was able to live in comfort.

Only one other matter remains to be told, and my readers will readily guess what it is. As soon as the troubles were at an end, I posted down to Aunay, where I was received by the ladies with every mark of pleasure. The old friendship was renewed, and in course of time Marie de Brione accompanied me to Vançey as my wife. Madame Coutance rarely visited Paris again, but spent the rest of her life quietly either on her own estate or with her niece at Vançey.

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