

Chapter VI. The Bee-Hive, the Bees, and the Honey.

The bishop of Vannes, much annoyed at having met D'Artagnan at M. Percerin's, returned to Saint-Mande in no very good humor. Moliere, on the other hand, quite delighted at having made such a capital rough sketch, and at knowing where to find his original again, whenever he should desire to convert his sketch into a picture, Moliere arrived in the merriest of moods. All the first story of the left wing was occupied by the most celebrated Epicureans in Paris, and those on the freest footing in the house--every one in his compartment, like the bees in their cells, employed in producing the honey intended for that royal cake which M. Fouquet proposed to offer his majesty Louis XIV. during the *fete* at Vaux. Pelisson, his head leaning on his hand, was engaged in drawing out the plan of the prologue to the "Facheux," a comedy in three acts, which was to be put on the stage by Poquelin de Moliere, as D'Artagnan called him, or Coquelin de Voliere, as Porthos styled him. Loret, with all the charming innocence of a gazetteer,--the gazetteers of all ages have always been so artless!--Loret was composing an account of the *fetes* at Vaux, before those *fetes* had taken place. La Fontaine sauntered about from one to the other, a peripatetic, absent-minded, boring, unbearable dreamer, who kept buzzing and humming at everybody's elbow a thousand poetic abstractions. He so often disturbed Pelisson, that the latter, raising his head, crossly said, "At least, La Fontaine, supply me with a rhyme, since you have the run of the gardens at Parnassus."

"What rhyme do you want?" asked the *Fabler* as Madame de Sevigne used to call him.

"I want a rhyme to *lumiere*."

"*Orniere*," answered La Fontaine.

"Ah, but, my good friend, one cannot talk of *wheel-ruts* when celebrating the delights of Vaux," said Loret.

"Besides, it doesn't rhyme," answered Pelisson.

"What! doesn't rhyme!" cried La Fontaine, in surprise.

"Yes; you have an abominable habit, my friend,--a habit which will ever prevent your becoming a poet of the first order. You rhyme in a slovenly manner."

"Oh, oh, you think so, do you, Pelisson?"

"Yes, I do, indeed. Remember that a rhyme is never good so long as one can find a better."

"Then I will never write anything again save in prose," said La Fontaine, who had taken up Pelisson's reproach in earnest. "Ah! I often suspected I was nothing but a rascally poet! Yes, 'tis the very truth."

"Do not say so; your remark is too sweeping, and there is much that is good in your 'Fables.'"

"And to begin," continued La Fontaine, following up his idea, "I will go and burn a hundred verses I have just made."

"Where are your verses?"

"In my head."

"Well, if they are in your head you cannot burn them."

"True," said La Fontaine; "but if I do not burn them--"

"Well, what will happen if you do not burn them?"

"They will remain in my mind, and I shall never forget them!"

"The deuce!" cried Loret; "what a dangerous thing! One would go mad with it!"

"The deuce! the deuce!" repeated La Fontaine; "what can I do?"

"I have discovered the way," said Moliere, who had entered just at this point of the conversation.

"What way?"

"Write them first and burn them afterwards."

"How simple! Well, I should never have discovered that. What a mind that devil of a Moliere has!" said La Fontaine. Then, striking his forehead, "Oh, thou wilt never be aught but an ass, Jean La Fontaine!" he added.

"*What* are you saying there, my friend?" broke in Moliere, approaching the poet, whose aside he had heard.

"I say I shall never be aught but an ass," answered La Fontaine, with a heavy sigh and swimming eyes. "Yes, my friend," he added, with increasing grief, "it seems that I rhyme in a slovenly manner."

"Oh, 'tis wrong to say so."

"Nay, I am a poor creature!"

"Who said so?"

"*Parbleu!* 'twas Pelisson; did you not, Pelisson?"

Pelisson, again absorbed in his work, took good care not to answer.

"But if Pelisson said you were so," cried Moliere, "Pelisson has seriously offended you."

"Do you think so?"

"Ah! I advise you, as you are a gentleman, not to leave an insult like that unpunished."

"*What!*" exclaimed La Fontaine.

"Did you ever fight?"

"Once only, with a lieutenant in the light horse."

"What wrong had he done you?"

"It seems he ran away with my wife."

"Ah, ah!" said Moliere, becoming slightly pale; but as, at La Fontaine's declaration, the others had turned round, Moliere kept upon his lips the rallying smile which had so nearly died away, and continuing to make La Fontaine speak--

"And what was the result of the duel?"

"The result was, that on the ground my opponent disarmed me, and then made an apology, promising never again to set foot in my house."

"And you considered yourself satisfied?" said Moliere.

"Not at all! on the contrary, I picked up my sword. 'I beg your pardon, monsieur,' I said, 'I have not fought you because you were my wife's friend, but because I was told I ought to fight. So, as I have never known any peace save since you made her acquaintance, do me the pleasure to continue your visits as heretofore, or *morbleu!* let us set to again.' And so," continued La Fontaine, "he was compelled to resume his friendship with madame, and I continue to be the happiest of husbands."

All burst out laughing. Moliere alone passed his hand across his eyes. Why? Perhaps to wipe away a tear, perhaps to smother a sigh. Alas! we know that Moliere was a moralist, but he was not a philosopher. "'Tis

all one," he said, returning to the topic of the conversation, "Pelisson has insulted you."

"Ah, truly! I had already forgotten it."

"And I am going to challenge him on your behalf."

"Well, you can do so, if you think it indispensable."

"I do think it indispensable, and I am going to--"

"Stay," exclaimed La Fontaine, "I want your advice."

"Upon what? this insult?"

"No; tell me really now whether *lumiere* does not rhyme with *orniere*."

"I should make them rhyme."

"Ah! I knew you would."

"And I have made a hundred thousand such rhymes in my time."

"A hundred thousand!" cried La Fontaine. "Four times as many as 'La Pucelle,' which M. Chaplain is meditating. Is it also on this subject, too, that you have composed a hundred thousand verses?"

"Listen to me, you eternally absent-minded creature," said Moliere.

"It is certain," continued La Fontaine, "that *legume*, for instance, rhymes with *posthume*."

"In the plural, above all."

"Yes, above all in the plural, seeing that then it rhymes not with three letters, but with four; as *orniere* does with *lumiere*."

"But give me *ornieres* and *lumières* in the plural, my dear Pelisson," said La Fontaine, clapping his hand on the shoulder of his friend, whose insult he had quite forgotten, "and they will rhyme."

"Hem!" coughed Pelisson.

"Moliere says so, and Moliere is a judge of such things; he declares he has himself made a hundred thousand verses."

"Come," said Moliere, laughing, "he is off now."

"It is like *rivage*, which rhymes admirably with *herbage*. I would take my oath of it."

"But--" said Moliere.

"I tell you all this," continued La Fontaine, "because you are preparing a *divertissement* for Vaux, are you not?"

"Yes, the 'Facheux.'"

"Ah, yes, the 'Facheux;' yes, I recollect. Well, I was thinking a prologue would admirably suit your *divertissement*."

"Doubtless it would suit capitally."

"Ah! you are of my opinion?"

"So much so, that I have asked you to write this very prologue."

"You asked *me* to write it?"

"Yes, you, and on your refusal begged you to ask Pelisson, who is engaged upon it at this moment."

"Ah! that is what Pelisson is doing, then? I'faith, my dear Moliere, you are indeed often right."

"When?"

"When you call me absent-minded. It is a monstrous defect; I will cure myself of it, and do your prologue for you."

"But inasmuch as Pelisson is about it!--"

"Ah, true, miserable rascal that I am! Loret was indeed right in saying I was a poor creature."

"It was not Loret who said so, my friend."

"Well, then, whoever said so, 'tis the same to me! And so your *divertissement* is called the 'Facheux?' Well, can you make *heureux* rhyme with *facheux*?"

"If obliged, yes."

"And even with *capriceux*."

"Oh, no, no."

"It would be hazardous, and yet why so?"

"There is too great a difference in the cadences."

"I was fancying," said La Fontaine, leaving Moliere for Loret--"I was fancying--"

"What were you fancying?" said Loret, in the middle of a sentence. "Make haste."

"You are writing the prologue to the 'Facheux,' are you not?"

"No! *mordieu!* it is Pelisson."

"Ah, Pelisson," cried La Fontaine, going over to him, "I was fancying," he continued, "that the nymph of Vaux--"

"Ah, beautiful!" cried Loret. "The nymph of Vaux! thank you, La Fontaine; you have just given me the two concluding verses of my paper."

"Well, if you can rhyme so well, La Fontaine," said Pelisson, "tell me now in what way you would begin my prologue?"

"I should say, for instance, 'Oh! nymph, who--' After 'who' I should place a verb in the second person singular of the present indicative; and should go on thus: 'this grot profound.'"

"But the verb, the verb?" asked Pelisson.

"To admire the greatest king of all kings round," continued La Fontaine.

"But the verb, the verb," obstinately insisted Pelisson. "This second person singular of the present indicative?"

"Well, then; quittest:

"Oh, nymph, who quittest now this grot profound, To admire the greatest king of all kings round."

"You would not put 'who quittest,' would you?"

"Why not?"

"'Quittest,' after 'you who'?"

"Ah! my dear fellow," exclaimed La Fontaine, "you are a shocking pedant!"

"Without counting," said Moliere, "that the second verse, 'king of all

kings round,' is very weak, my dear La Fontaine."

"Then you see clearly I am nothing but a poor creature,--a shuffler, as you said."

"I never said so."

"Then, as Loret said."

"And it was not Loret either; it was Pelisson."

"Well, Pelisson was right a hundred times over. But what annoys me more than anything, my dear Moliere, is, that I fear we shall not have our Epicurean dresses."

"You expected yours, then, for the *fete*?"

"Yes, for the *fete*, and then for after the *fete*. My housekeeper told me that my own is rather faded."

"*Diable!* your housekeeper is right; rather more than faded."

"Ah, you see," resumed La Fontaine, "the fact is, I left it on the floor in my room, and my cat--"

"Well, your cat--"

"She made her nest upon it, which has rather changed its color."

Moliere burst out laughing; Pelisson and Loret followed his example. At this juncture, the bishop of Vannes appeared, with a roll of plans and parchments under his arm. As if the angel of death had chilled all gay and sprightly fancies--as if that wan form had scared away the Graces to whom Xenocrates sacrificed--silence immediately reigned through the study, and every one resumed his self-possession and his pen. Aramis distributed the notes of invitation, and thanked them in the name of M. Fouquet. "The superintendent," he said, "being kept to his room by business, could not come and see them, but begged them to send him some of the fruits of their day's work, to enable him to forget the fatigue of his labor in the night."

At these words, all settled down to work. La Fontaine placed himself at a table, and set his rapid pen an endless dance across the smooth white vellum; Pelisson made a fair copy of his prologue; Moliere contributed fifty fresh verses, with which his visit to Percerin had inspired him; Loret, an article on the marvelous *fetes* he predicted; and Aramis, laden with his booty like the king of the bees, that great black drone, decked with purple and gold, re-entered his apartment, silent and busy. But before departing, "Remember, gentlemen," said he, "we leave

to-morrow evening."

"In that case, I must give notice at home," said Moliere.

"Yes; poor Moliere!" said Loret, smiling; "he loves his home."

"*He loves,*' yes," replied Moliere, with his sad, sweet smile. "He loves,' that does not mean, they love him."

"As for me," said La Fontaine, "they love me at Chateau Thierry, I am very sure."

Aramis here re-entered after a brief disappearance.

"Will any one go with me?" he asked. "I am going by Paris, after having passed a quarter of an hour with M. Fouquet. I offer my carriage."

"Good," said Moliere, "I accept it. I am in a hurry."

"I shall dine here," said Loret. "M. de Gourville has promised me some craw-fish."

"He has promised me some whittings. Find a rhyme for that, La Fontaine."

Aramis went out laughing, as only he could laugh, and Moliere followed him. They were at the bottom of the stairs, when La Fontaine opened the door, and shouted out:

"He has promised us some whittings, In return for these our writings."

The shouts of laughter reached the ears of Fouquet at the moment Aramis opened the door of the study. As to Moliere, he had undertaken to order the horses, while Aramis went to exchange a parting word with the superintendent. "Oh, how they are laughing there!" said Fouquet, with a sigh.

"Do you not laugh, monseigneur?"

"I laugh no longer now, M. d'Herblay. The *fete* is approaching; money is departing."

"Have I not told you that was my business?"

"Yes, you promised me millions."

"You shall have them the day after the king's *entree* into Vaux."

Fouquet looked closely at Aramis, and passed the back of his icy hand

across his moistened brow. Aramis perceived that the superintendent either doubted him, or felt he was powerless to obtain the money. How could Fouquet suppose that a poor bishop, ex-abbe, ex-musketeer, could find any?

"Why doubt me?" said Aramis. Fouquet smiled and shook his head.

"Man of little faith!" added the bishop.

"My dear M. d'Herblay," answered Fouquet, "if I fall--"

"Well; if you 'fall'?"

"I shall, at least, fall from such a height, that I shall shatter myself in falling." Then giving himself a shake, as though to escape from himself, "Whence came you," said he, "my friend?"

"From Paris--from Percerin."

"And what have you been doing at Percerin's, for I suppose you attach no great importance to our poets' dresses?"

"No; I went to prepare a surprise."

"Surprise?"

"Yes; which you are going to give to the king."

"And will it cost much?"

"Oh! a hundred pistoles you will give Lebrun."

"A painting?--Ah! all the better! And what is this painting to represent?"

"I will tell you; then at the same time, whatever you may say or think of it, I went to see the dresses for our poets."

"Bah! and they will be rich and elegant?"

"Splendid! There will be few great monseigneurs with so good. People will see the difference there is between the courtiers of wealth and those of friendship."

"Ever generous and grateful, dear prelate."

"In your school."

Fouquet grasped his hand. "And where are you going?" he said.

"I am off to Paris, when you shall have given a certain letter."

"For whom?"

"M. de Lyonne."

"And what do you want with Lyonne?"

"I wish to make him sign a *lettre de cachet*."

"*Lettre de cachet!* Do you desire to put somebody in the Bastile?"

"On the contrary--to let somebody out."

"And who?"

"A poor devil--a youth, a lad who has been Bastiled these ten years, for two Latin verses he made against the Jesuits."

"Two Latin verses! and, for 'two Latin verses,' the miserable being has been in prison for ten years!"

"Yes!"

"And has committed no other crime?"

"Beyond this, he is as innocent as you or I."

"On your word?"

"On my honor!"

"And his name is--"

"Seldon."

"Yes.--But it is too bad. You knew this, and you never told me!"

"Twas only yesterday his mother applied to me, monseigneur."

"And the woman is poor!"

"In the deepest misery."

"Heaven," said Fouquet, "sometimes bears with such injustice on earth, that I hardly wonder there are wretches who doubt of its existence. Stay, M. d'Herblay." And Fouquet, taking a pen, wrote a few rapid lines to his colleague Lyonne. Aramis took the letter and made ready to go.

"Wait," said Fouquet. He opened his drawer, and took out ten government notes which were there, each for a thousand francs. "Stay," he said; "set the son at liberty, and give this to the mother; but, above all, do not tell her--"

"What, monseigneur?"

"That she is ten thousand livres richer than I. She would say I am but a poor superintendent! Go! and I pray that God will bless those who are mindful of his poor!"

"So also do I pray," replied Aramis, kissing Fouquet's hand.

And he went out quickly, carrying off the letter for Lyonne and the notes for Seldon's mother, and taking up Moliere, who was beginning to lose patience.