Chapter XIII. Nectar and Ambrosia.

M. Fouquet held the stirrup of the king, who, having dismounted, bowed most graciously, and more graciously still held out his hand to him, which Fouquet, in spite of a slight resistance on the king's part, carried respectfully to his lips. The king wished to wait in the first courtyard for the arrival of the carriages, nor had he long to wait, for the roads had been put into excellent order by the superintendent, and a stone would hardly have been found of the size of an egg the whole way from Melun to Vaux; so that the carriages, rolling along as though on a carpet, brought the ladies to Vaux, without jolting or fatigue, by eight o'clock. They were received by Madame Fouquet, and at the moment they made their appearance, a light as bright as day burst forth from every quarter, trees, vases, and marble statues. This species of enchantment lasted until their majesties had retired into the palace. All these wonders and magical effects which the chronicler has heaped up, or rather embalmed, in his recital, at the risk of rivaling the brain-born scenes of romancers; these splendors whereby night seemed vanquished and
nature corrected, together with every delight and luxury combined for the satisfaction of all the senses, as well as the imagination, Fouquet did in real truth offer to his sovereign in that enchanting retreat of which no monarch could at that time boast of possessing an equal. We do not intend to describe the grand banquet, at which the royal guests were present, nor the concerts, nor the fairy-like and more than magic transformations and metamorphoses; it will be enough for our purpose to depict the countenance the king assumed, which, from being gay, soon wore a very gloomy, constrained, and irritated expression. He remembered his own residence, royal though it was, and the mean and indifferent style of luxury that prevailed there, which comprised but little more than what was merely useful for the royal wants, without being his own personal property. The large vases of the Louvre, the older furniture and plate of Henry II., of Francis I., and of Louis XI., were but historic monuments of earlier days; nothing but specimens of art, the relics of his predecessors; while with Fouquet, the value of the article was as much in the workmanship as in the article itself. Fouquet ate from a gold service, which artists in his own employ had modeled and cast for him alone. Fouquet drank wines of which the king of France did not even know the name, and drank them out of goblets each more valuable than the entire royal cellar.

What, too, was to be said of the apartments, the hangings, the pictures, the servants and officers, of every description, of his household? What of the mode of service in which etiquette was replaced by order; stiff formality by personal, unrestrained comfort; the happiness and contentment of the guest became the supreme law of all who obeyed the host? The perfect swarm of busily engaged persons moving about noiselessly; the multitude of guests,--who were, however, even less numerous than the servants who waited on them,--the myriad of

exquisitely prepared dishes, of gold and silver vases; the floods of dazzling light, the masses of unknown flowers of which the hot-houses had been despoiled, redundant with luxuriance of unequaled scent and beauty; the perfect harmony of the surroundings, which, indeed, was no more than the prelude of the promised fete, charmed all who were there; and they testified their admiration over and over again, not by voice or gesture, but by deep silence and rapt attention, those two languages of the courtier which acknowledge the hand of no master powerful enough to restrain them.

As for the king, his eyes filled with tears; he dared not look at the queen. Anne of Austria, whose pride was superior to that of any creature breathing, overwhelmed her host by the contempt with which she treated everything handed to her. The young queen, kind-hearted by nature and curious by disposition, praised Fouquet, ate with an exceedingly good appetite, and asked the names of the strange fruits as they were placed upon the table. Fouquet replied that he was not aware of their names. The fruits came from his own stores; he had often cultivated them himself, having an intimate acquaintance with the cultivation of exotic fruits and plants. The king felt and appreciated the delicacy of the replies, but was only the more humiliated; he thought the queen a little too familiar in her manners, and that Anne of Austria resembled Juno a little too much, in being too proud and haughty; his chief anxiety, however, was himself, that he might remain cold and distant in his behavior, bordering lightly the limits of supreme disdain or simple admiration.

But Fouquet had foreseen all this; he was, in fact, one of those men who foresee everything. The king had expressly declared that, so long as he remained under Fouquet's roof, he did not wish his own different repasts to be served in accordance with the usual etiquette, and that he would, consequently, dine with the rest of society; but by the thoughtful attention of the surintendant, the king's dinner was served up separately, if one may so express it, in the middle of the general table; the dinner, wonderful in every respect, from the dishes of which was composed, comprised everything the king liked and generally preferred to anything else. Louis had no excuse--he, indeed, who had the keenest appetite in his kingdom--for saying that he was not hungry. Nay, M. Fouquet did even better still; he certainly, in obedience to the king's expressed desire, seated himself at the table, but as soon as the soups were served, he arose and personally waited on the king, while Madame Fouquet stood behind the queen-mother's armchair. The disdain of Juno and the sulky fits of temper of Jupiter could not resist this excess of kindly feeling and polite attention. The queen ate a biscuit dipped in a glass of San-Lucar wine; and the king ate of everything, saying to M. Fouquet: "It is impossible, monsieur le surintendant, to dine better anywhere." Whereupon the whole court began, on all sides, to devour the dishes spread before them with such enthusiasm that it looked as though a cloud of Egyptian locusts was settling down on green and

growing crops.

As soon, however, as his hunger was appeased, the king became morose and overgloomed again; the more so in proportion to the satisfaction he fancied he had previously manifested, and particularly on account of the deferential manner which his courtiers had shown towards Fouquet. D'Artagnan, who ate a good deal and drank but little, without allowing it to be noticed, did not lose a single opportunity, but made a great number of observations which he turned to good profit.

When the supper was finished, the king expressed a wish not to lose the promenade. The park was illuminated; the moon, too, as if she had placed herself at the orders of the lord of Vaux, silvered the trees and lake with her own bright and quasi-phosphorescent light. The air was strangely soft and balmy; the daintily shell-gravelled walks through the thickly set avenues yielded luxuriously to the feet. The fete was complete in every respect, for the king, having met La Valliere in one of the winding paths of the wood, was able to press her hand and say, "I love you," without any one overhearing him except M. d'Artagnan, who followed, and M. Fouquet, who preceded him.

The dreamy night of magical enchantments stole smoothly on. The king having requested to be shown to his room, there was immediately a movement in every direction. The queens passed to their own apartments, accompanied by them music of theorbos and lutes; the king found his musketeers awaiting him on the grand flight of steps, for M. Fouquet had brought them on from Melun and had invited them to supper. D'Artagnan's suspicions at once disappeared. He was weary, he had supped well, and wished, for once in his life, thoroughly to enjoy a fete given by a man who was in every sense of the word a king. "M. Fouquet," he said, "is the man for me."

The king was conducted with the greatest ceremony to the chamber of Morpheus, of which we owe some cursory description to our readers. It was the handsomest and largest in the palace. Lebrun had painted on the vaulted ceiling the happy as well as the unhappy dreams which Morpheus inflicts on kings as well as on other men. Everything that sleep gives birth to that is lovely, its fairy scenes, its flowers and nectar, the wild voluptuousness or profound repose of the senses, had the painter elaborated on his frescoes. It was a composition as soft and pleasing in one part as dark and gloomy and terrible in another. The poisoned chalice, the glittering dagger suspended over the head of the sleeper; wizards and phantoms with terrific masks, those half-dim shadows more alarming than the approach of fire or the somber face of midnight, these, and such as these, he had made the companions of his more pleasing pictures. No sooner had the king entered his room than a cold shiver seemed to pass through him, and on Fouquet asking him the cause of it, the king replied, as pale as death:

"I am sleepy, that is all."

"Does your majesty wish for your attendants at once?"

"No; I have to talk with a few persons first," said the king. "Will you have the goodness to tell M. Colbert I wish to see him."

Fouquet bowed and left the room.