

Chapter XVI. Jealousy.

The torches we have just referred to, the eager attention every one displayed, and the new ovation paid to the king by Fouquet, arrived in time to suspend the effect of a resolution which La Valliere had already considerably shaken in Louis XIV.'s heart. He looked at Fouquet with a feeling almost of gratitude for having given La Valliere an opportunity of showing herself so generously disposed, so powerful in the influence she exercised over his heart. The moment of the last and greatest display had arrived. Hardly had Fouquet conducted the king towards the chateau, when a mass of fire burst from the dome of Vaux, with a prodigious uproar, pouring a flood of dazzling cataracts of rays on every side, and illumining the remotest corners of the gardens. The fireworks began. Colbert, at twenty paces from the king, who was surrounded and feted by the owner of Vaux, seemed, by the obstinate persistence of his gloomy thoughts, to do his utmost to recall Louis's attention, which the magnificence of the spectacle was already, in his opinion, too easily diverting. Suddenly, just as Louis was on the point of holding it out to Fouquet, he perceived in his hand the paper which, as he believed, La Valliere had dropped at his feet as she hurried away. The still stronger magnet of love drew the young prince's attention towards the souvenir of his idol; and, by the brilliant light, which increased momentarily in beauty, and drew from the neighboring villages loud cheers of admiration, the king read the letter, which he supposed was a loving and tender epistle La Valliere had destined for him. But as he read it, a death-like pallor stole over his face, and an expression of deep-seated wrath, illumined by the many-colored fire which gleamed so brightly, soaringly around the scene, produced a terrible spectacle, which every one would have shuddered at, could they only have read into his heart, now torn by the most stormy and most bitter passions. There was no truce for him now, influenced as he was by jealousy and mad passion. From the very moment when the dark truth was revealed to him, every gentler feeling seemed to disappear; pity, kindness of consideration, the religion of hospitality, all were forgotten. In the bitter pang which wrung his heart, he, still too weak to hide his sufferings, was almost on the point of uttering a cry of alarm, and calling his guards to gather round him. This letter which Colbert had thrown down at the king's feet, the reader has doubtlessly guessed, was the same that had disappeared with the porter Toby at Fontainebleau, after the attempt which Fouquet had made upon La Valliere's heart. Fouquet saw the king's pallor, and was far from guessing the evil; Colbert saw the king's anger, and rejoiced inwardly at the approach of the storm. Fouquet's voice drew the young prince from his wrathful reverie.

"What is the matter, sire?" inquired the superintendent, with an expression of graceful interest.

Louis made a violent effort over himself, as he replied, "Nothing."

"I am afraid your majesty is suffering?"

"I am suffering, and have already told you so, monsieur; but it is nothing."

And the king, without waiting for the termination of the fireworks, turned towards the chateau. Fouquet accompanied him, and the whole court followed, leaving the remains of the fireworks consuming for their own amusement. The superintendent endeavored again to question Louis XIV., but did not succeed in obtaining a reply. He imagined there had been some misunderstanding between Louis and La Valliere in the park, which had resulted in a slight quarrel; and that the king, who was not ordinarily sulky by disposition, but completely absorbed by his passion for La Valliere, had taken a dislike to every one because his mistress had shown herself offended with him. This idea was sufficient to console him; he had even a friendly and kindly smile for the young king, when the latter wished him good night. This, however, was not all the king had to submit to; he was obliged to undergo the usual ceremony, which on that evening was marked by close adherence to the strictest etiquette. The next day was the one fixed for the departure; it was but proper that the guests should thank their host, and show him a little attention in return for the expenditure of his twelve millions. The only remark, approaching to amiability, which the king could find to say to M. Fouquet, as he took leave of him, were in these words, "M. Fouquet, you shall hear from me. Be good enough to desire M. d'Artagnan to come here."

But the blood of Louis XIV., who had so profoundly dissimulated his feelings, boiled in his veins; and he was perfectly willing to order M. Fouquet to be put an end to with the same readiness, indeed, as his predecessor had caused the assassination of le Marechal d'Ancre; and so he disguised the terrible resolution he had formed beneath one of those royal smiles which, like lightning-flashes, indicated coups d'etat. Fouquet took the king's hand and kissed it; Louis shuddered throughout his whole frame, but allowed M. Fouquet to touch his hand with his lips. Five minutes afterwards, D'Artagnan, to whom the royal order had been communicated, entered Louis XIV.'s apartment. Aramis and Philippe were in theirs, still eagerly attentive, and still listening with all their ears. The king did not even give the captain of the musketeers time to approach his armchair, but ran forward to meet him. "Take care," he exclaimed, "that no one enters here."

"Very good, sire," replied the captain, whose glance had for a long time past analyzed the stormy indications on the royal countenance. He gave the necessary order at the door; but, returning to the king, he said, "Is there something fresh the matter, your majesty?"

"How many men have you here?" inquired the king, without making any other reply to the question addressed to him.

"What for, sire?"

"How many men have you, I say?" repeated the king, stamping upon the ground with his foot.

"I have the musketeers."

"Well; and what others?"

"Twenty guards and thirteen Swiss."

"How many men will be required to--"

"To do what, sire?" replied the musketeer, opening his large, calm eyes.

"To arrest M. Fouquet."

D'Artagnan fell back a step.

"To arrest M. Fouquet!" he burst forth.

"Are you going to tell me that it is impossible?" exclaimed the king, in tones of cold, vindictive passion.

"I never say that anything is impossible," replied D'Artagnan, wounded to the quick.

"Very well; do it, then."

D'Artagnan turned on his heel, and made his way towards the door; it was but a short distance, and he cleared it in half a dozen paces; when he reached it he suddenly paused, and said, "Your majesty will forgive me, but, in order to effect this arrest, I should like written directions."

"For what purpose--and since when has the king's word been insufficient for you?"

"Because the word of a king, when it springs from a feeling of anger, may possibly change when the feeling changes."

"A truce to set phrases, monsieur; you have another thought besides that?"

"Oh, I, at least, have certain thoughts and ideas, which, unfortunately, others have not," D'Artagnan replied, impertinently.

The king, in the tempest of his wrath, hesitated, and drew back in the face of D'Artagnan's frank courage, just as a horse crouches on his haunches under the strong hand of a bold and experienced rider. "What is your thought?" he exclaimed.

"This, sire," replied D'Artagnan: "you cause a man to be arrested when you are still under his roof; and passion is alone the cause of that. When your anger shall have passed, you will regret what you have done; and then I wish to be in a position to show you your signature. If that, however, should fail to be a reparation, it will at least show us that the king was wrong to lose his temper."

"Wrong to lose his temper!" cried the king, in a loud, passionate voice. "Did not my father, my grandfathers, too, before me, lose their temper at times, in Heaven's name?"

"The king your father and the king your grandfather never lost their temper except when under the protection of their own palace."

"The king is master wherever he may be."

"That is a flattering, complimentary phrase which cannot proceed from any one but M. Colbert; but it happens not to be the truth. The king is at home in every man's house when he has driven its owner out of it."

The king bit his lips, but said nothing.

"Can it be possible?" said D'Artagnan; "here is a man who is positively ruining himself in order to please you, and you wish to have him arrested! Mordieux! Sire, if my name was Fouquet, and people treated me in that manner, I would swallow at a single gulp all sorts of fireworks and other things, and I would set fire to them, and send myself and everybody else in blown-up atoms to the sky. But it is all the same; it is your wish, and it shall be done."

"Go," said the king; "but have you men enough?"

"Do you suppose I am going to take a whole host to help me? Arrest M. Fouquet! why, that is so easy that a very child might do it! It is like drinking a glass of wormwood; one makes an ugly face, and that is all."

"If he defends himself?"

"He! it is not at all likely. Defend himself when such extreme harshness as you are going to practice makes the man a very martyr! Nay, I am sure that if he has a million of francs left, which I very much doubt, he would be willing enough to give it in order to have such a termination as this. But what does that matter? it shall be done at once."

"Stay," said the king; "do not make his arrest a public affair."

"That will be more difficult."

"Why so?"

"Because nothing is easier than to go up to M. Fouquet in the midst of a thousand enthusiastic guests who surround him, and say, 'In the king's name, I arrest you.' But to go up to him, to turn him first one way and then another, to drive him up into one of the corners of the chess-board, in such a way that he cannot escape; to take him away from his guests, and keep him a prisoner for you, without one of them, alas! having heard anything about it; that, indeed, is a genuine difficulty, the greatest of all, in truth; and I hardly see how it is to be done."

"You had better say it is impossible, and you will have finished much sooner. Heaven help me, but I seem to be surrounded by people who prevent me doing what I wish."

"I do not prevent your doing anything. Have you indeed decided?"

"Take care of M. Fouquet, until I shall have made up my mind by to-morrow morning."

"That shall be done, sire."

"And return, when I rise in the morning, for further orders; and now leave me to myself."

"You do not even want M. Colbert, then?" said the musketeer, firing his last shot as he was leaving the room. The king started. With his whole mind fixed on the thought of revenge, he had forgotten the cause and substance of the offense.

"No, no one," he said; "no one here! Leave me."

D'Artagnan quitted the room. The king closed the door with his own hands, and began to walk up and down his apartment at a furious pace, like a wounded bull in an arena, trailing from his horn the colored streamers and the iron darts. At last he began to take comfort in the expression of his violent feelings.

"Miserable wretch that he is! not only does he squander my finances, but with his ill-gotten plunder he corrupts secretaries, friends, generals, artists, and all, and tries to rob me of the one to whom I am most attached. This is the reason that perfidious girl so boldly took his part! Gratitude! and who can tell whether it was not a stronger feeling--love itself?" He gave himself up for a moment to the bitterest reflections. "A satyr!" he thought, with that abhorrent hate with which

young men regard those more advanced in life, who still think of love. "A man who has never found opposition or resistance in any one, who lavishes his gold and jewels in every direction, and who retains his staff of painters in order to take the portraits of his mistresses in the costume of goddesses." The king trembled with passion as he continued, "He pollutes and profanes everything that belongs to me! He destroys everything that is mine. He will be my death at last, I know. That man is too much for me; he is my mortal enemy, but he shall forthwith fall! I hate him--I hate him--I hate him!" and as he pronounced these words, he struck the arm of the chair in which he was sitting violently, over and over again, and then rose like one in an epileptic fit. "To-morrow! to-morrow! oh, happy day!" he murmured, "when the sun rises, no other rival shall that brilliant king of space possess but me. That man shall fall so low that when people look at the abject ruin my anger shall have wrought, they will be forced to confess at last and at least that I am indeed greater than he." The king, who was incapable of mastering his emotions any longer, knocked over with a blow of his fist a small table placed close to his bedside, and in the very bitterness of anger, almost weeping, and half-suffocated, he threw himself on his bed, dressed as he was, and bit the sheets in his extremity of passion, trying to find repose of body at least there. The bed creaked beneath his weight, and with the exception of a few broken sounds, emerging, or, one might say, exploding, from his overburdened chest, absolute silence soon reigned in the chamber of Morpheus.