

Chapter XXXV. The Last Supper.

The superintendent had no doubt received advice of the approaching departure, for he was giving a farewell dinner to his friends. From the bottom to the top of the house, the hurry of the servants bearing dishes, and the diligence of the registres, denoted an approaching change in offices and kitchen. D'Artagnan, with his order in his hand, presented himself at the offices, when he was told it was too late to pay cash, the chest was closed. He only replied: "On the king's service."

The clerk, a little put out by the serious air of the captain, replied, that "that was a very respectable reason, but that the customs of the house were respectable likewise; and that, in consequence, he begged the bearer to call again next day." D'Artagnan asked if he could not see M. Fouquet. The clerk replied that M. le surintendant did not interfere with such details, and rudely closed the outer door in the captain's face. But the latter had foreseen this stroke, and placed his boot between the door and the door-case, so that the lock did not catch, and the clerk was still nose to nose with his interlocutor. This made him change his tone, and say, with terrified politeness, "If monsieur wishes to speak to M. le surintendant, he must go to the ante-chambers; these are the offices, where monseigneur never comes."

"Oh! very well! Where are they?" replied D'Artagnan.

"On the other side of the court," said the clerk, delighted to be free. D'Artagnan crossed the court, and fell in with a crowd of servants.

"Monseigneur sees nobody at this hour," he was answered by a fellow carrying a vermeil dish, in which were three pheasants and twelve quails.

"Tell him," said the captain, laying hold of the servant by the end of his dish, "that I am M. d'Artagnan, captain of his majesty's musketeers."

The fellow uttered a cry of surprise, and disappeared; D'Artagnan following him slowly. He arrived just in time to meet M. Pelisson in the ante-chamber: the latter, a little pale, came hastily out of the dining-room to learn what was the matter. D'Artagnan smiled.

"There is nothing unpleasant, Monsieur Pelisson; only a little order to receive the money for."

"Ah!" said Fouquet's friend, breathing more freely; and he took the captain by the hand, and, dragging him behind him, led him into the dining-room, where a number of friends surrounded the surintendant, placed in the center, and buried in the cushions of a fauteuil. There

were assembled all the Epicureans who so lately at Vaux had done the honors of the mansion of wit and money in aid of M. Fouquet. Joyous friends, for the most part faithful, they had not fled their protector at the approach of the storm, and, in spite of the threatening heavens, in spite of the trembling earth, they remained there, smiling, cheerful, as devoted in misfortune as they had been in prosperity. On the left of the surintendant sat Madame de Belliere; on his right was Madame Fouquet; as if braving the laws of the world, and putting all vulgar reasons of propriety to silence, the two protecting angels of this man united to offer, at the moment of the crisis, the support of their twined arms. Madame de Belliere was pale, trembling, and full of respectful attentions for madame la surintendante, who, with one hand on her husband's, was looking anxiously towards the door by which Pelisson had gone out to bring D'Artagnan. The captain entered at first full of courtesy, and afterwards of admiration, when, with his infallible glance, he had divined as well as taken in the expression of every face. Fouquet raised himself up in his chair.

"Pardon me, Monsieur d'Artagnan," said he, "if I did not myself receive you when coming in the king's name." And he pronounced the last words with a sort of melancholy firmness, which filled the hearts of all his friends with terror.

"Monseigneur," replied D'Artagnan, "I only come to you in the king's name to demand payment of an order for two hundred pistoles."

The clouds passed from every brow but that of Fouquet, which still remained overcast.

"Ah! then," said he, "perhaps you also are setting out for Nantes?"

"I do not know whither I am setting out, monseigneur."

"But," said Madame Fouquet, recovered from her fright, "you are not going so soon, monsieur le capitaine, as not to do us the honor to take a seat with us?"

"Madame, I should esteem that a great honor done me, but I am so pressed for time, that, you see, I have been obliged to permit myself to interrupt your repast to procure payment of my note."

"The reply to which shall be gold," said Fouquet, making a sign to his intendant, who went out with the order D'Artagnan handed him.

"Oh!" said the latter, "I was not uneasy about the payment; the house is good."

A painful smile passed over the pale features of Fouquet.

"Are you in pain?" asked Madame de Belliere.

"Do you feel your attack coming on?" asked Madame Fouquet.

"Neither, thank you both," said Fouquet.

"Your attack?" said D'Artagnan, in his turn; "are you unwell, monseigneur?"

"I have a tertian fever, which seized me after the fete at Vaux."

"Caught cold in the grottos, at night, perhaps?"

"No, no; nothing but agitation, that was all."

"The too much heart you displayed in your reception of the king," said La Fontaine, quietly, without suspicion that he was uttering a sacrilege.

"We cannot devote too much heart to the reception of our king," said Fouquet, mildly, to his poet.

"Monsieur meant to say the too great ardor," interrupted D'Artagnan, with perfect frankness and much amenity. "The fact is, monseigneur, that hospitality was never practiced as at Vaux."

Madame Fouquet permitted her countenance to show clearly that if Fouquet had conducted himself well towards the king, the king had hardly done the like to the minister. But D'Artagnan knew the terrible secret. He alone with Fouquet knew it; those two men had not, the one the courage to complain, the other the right to accuse. The captain, to whom the two hundred pistoles were brought, was about to take his leave, when Fouquet, rising, took a glass of wine, and ordered one to be given to D'Artagnan.

"Monsieur," said he, "to the health of the king, whatever may happen."

"And to your health, monseigneur, whatever may happen," said D'Artagnan.

He bowed, with these words of evil omen, to all the company, who rose as soon as they heard the sound of his spurs and boots at the bottom of the stairs.

"I, for a moment, thought it was I and not my money he wanted," said Fouquet, endeavoring to laugh.

"You!" cried his friends; "and what for, in the name of Heaven!"

"Oh! do not deceive yourselves, my dear brothers in Epicurus," said the superintendent; "I do not wish to make a comparison between the most humble sinner on the earth, and the God we adore, but remember, he gave one day to his friends a repast which is called the Last Supper, and which was nothing but a farewell dinner, like that which we are making at this moment."

A painful cry of denial arose from all parts of the table. "Shut the doors," said Fouquet, and the servants disappeared. "My friends," continued Fouquet, lowering his voice, "what was I formerly? What am I now? Consult among yourselves and reply. A man like me sinks when he does not continue to rise. What shall we say, then, when he really sinks? I have no more money, no more credit; I have no longer anything but powerful enemies, and powerless friends."

"Quick!" cried Pelisson. "Since you explain yourself with such frankness, it is our duty to be frank, likewise. Yes, you are ruined--yes, you are hastening to your ruin--stop. And, in the first place, what money have we left?"

"Seven hundred thousand livres," said the intendant.

"Bread," murmured Madame Fouquet.

"Relays," said Pelisson, "relays, and fly!"

"Whither?"

"To Switzerland--to Savoy--but fly!"

"If monseigneur flies," said Madame Belliere, "it will be said that he was guilty--was afraid."

"More than that, it will be said that I have carried away twenty millions with me."

"We will draw up memoirs to justify you," said La Fontaine. "Fly!"

"I will remain," said Fouquet. "And, besides, does not everything serve me?"

"You have Belle-Isle," cried the Abbe Fouquet.

"And I am naturally going there, when going to Nantes," replied the superintendent. "Patience, then, patience!"

"Before arriving at Nantes, what a distance!" said Madame Fouquet.

"Yes, I know that well," replied Fouquet. "But what is to be done there?"

The king summons me to the States. I know well it is for the purpose of ruining me; but to refuse to go would be to evince uneasiness."

"Well, I have discovered the means of reconciling everything," cried Pelisson. "You are going to set out for Nantes."

Fouquet looked at him with an air of surprise.

"But with friends; but in your own carriage as far as Orleans; in your own barge as far as Nantes; always ready to defend yourself, if you are attacked; to escape, if you are threatened. In fact, you will carry your money against all chances; and, whilst flying, you will only have obeyed the king; then, reaching the sea, when you like, you will embark for Belle-Isle, and from Belle-Isle you will shoot out wherever it may please you, like the eagle that leaps into space when it has been driven from its eyrie."

A general assent followed Pelisson's words. "Yes, do so," said Madame Fouquet to her husband.

"Do so," said Madame de Belliere.

"Do it! do it!" cried all his friends.

"I will do so," replied Fouquet.

"This very evening?"

"In an hour?"

"Instantly."

"With seven hundred thousand livres you can lay the foundation of another fortune," said the Abbe Fouquet.

"What is there to prevent our arming corsairs at Belle-Isle?"

"And, if necessary, we will go and discover a new world," added La Fontaine, intoxicated with fresh projects and enthusiasm.

A knock at the door interrupted this concert of joy and hope. "A courier from the king," said the master of the ceremonies.

A profound silence immediately ensued, as if the message brought by this courier was nothing but a reply to all the projects given birth to a moment before. Every one waited to see what the master would do. His brow was streaming with perspiration, and he was really suffering from his fever at that instant. He passed into his cabinet, to receive the king's message. There prevailed, as we have said, such a silence in the

chambers, and throughout the attendance, that from the dining-room could be heard the voice of Fouquet, saying, "That is well, monsieur." This voice was, however, broken by fatigue, and trembled with emotion. An instant after, Fouquet called Gourville, who crossed the gallery amidst the universal expectation. At length, he himself re-appeared among his guests; but it was no longer the same pale, spiritless countenance they had beheld when he left them; from pale he had become livid; and from spiritless, annihilated. A breathing, living specter, he advanced with his arms stretched out, his mouth parched, like a shade that comes to salute the friends of former days. On seeing him thus, every one cried out, and every one rushed towards Fouquet. The latter, looking at Pelisson, leaned upon his wife, and pressed the icy hand of the Marquise de Belliere.

"Well," said he, in a voice which had nothing human in it.

"What has happened, my God!" said some one to him.

Fouquet opened his right hand, which was clenched, but glistening with perspiration, and displayed a paper, upon which Pelisson cast a terrified glance. He read the following lines, written by the king's hand:

"DEAR AND WELL-BELOVED MONSIEUR FOUQUET,--Give us, upon that which you have left of ours, the sum of seven hundred thousand livres, of which we stand in need to prepare for our departure.

"And, as we know your health is not good, we pray God to restore you, and to have you in His holy keeping. "LOUIS.

"The present letter is to serve as a receipt."

A murmur of terror circulated through the apartment.

"Well," cried Pelisson, in his turn, "you have received that letter?"

"Received it, yes!"

"What will you do, then?"

"Nothing, since I have received it."

"But--"

"If I have received it, Pelisson, I have paid it," said the surintendant, with a simplicity that went to the heart of all present.

"You have paid it!" cried Madame Fouquet. "Then we are ruined!"

"Come, no useless words," interrupted Pelisson. "Next to money, life. Monseigneur, to horse! to horse!"

"What, leave us!" at once cried both the women, wild with grief.

"Eh! monseigneur, in saving yourself, you save us all. To horse!"

"But he cannot hold himself on. Look at him."

"Oh! if he takes time to reflect--" said the intrepid Pelisson.

"He is right," murmured Fouquet.

"Monseigneur! Monseigneur!" cried Gourville, rushing up the stairs, four steps at once. "Monseigneur!"

"Well! what?"

"I escorted, as you desired, the king's courier with the money."

"Yes."

"Well! when I arrived at the Palais Royal, I saw--"

"Take breath, my poor friend, take breath; you are suffocating."

"What did you see?" cried the impatient friends.

"I saw the musketeers mounting on horseback," said Gourville.

"There, then!" cried every voice at once; "there, then! is there an instant to be lost?"

Madame Fouquet rushed downstairs, calling for her horses; Madame de Belliere flew after her, catching her in her arms, and saying: "Madame, in the name of his safety, do not betray anything, do not manifest alarm."

Pelisson ran to have the horses put to the carriages. And, in the meantime, Gourville gathered in his hat all that the weeping friends were able to throw into it of gold and silver--the last offering, the pious alms made to misery by poverty. The surintendant, dragged along by some, carried by others, was shut up in his carriage. Gourville took the reins, and mounted the box. Pelisson supported Madame Fouquet, who had fainted. Madame de Belliere had more strength, and was well paid for it; she received Fouquet's last kiss. Pelisson easily explained this precipitate departure by saying that an order from the king had summoned the minister to Nantes.