

Chapter XXXIX. How the King, Louis XIV., Played His Little Part.

As Fouquet was alighting from his carriage, to enter the castle of Nantes, a man of mean appearance went up to him with marks of the greatest respect, and gave him a letter. D'Artagnan endeavored to prevent this man from speaking to Fouquet, and pushed him away, but the message had been given to the surintendant. Fouquet opened the letter and read it, and instantly a vague terror, which D'Artagnan did not fail to penetrate, was painted on the countenance of the first minister. Fouquet put the paper into the portfolio which he had under his arm, and passed on towards the king's apartments. D'Artagnan, through the small windows made at every landing of the donjon stairs, saw, as he went up behind Fouquet, the man who had delivered the note, looking round him on the place and making signs to several persons, who disappeared in the adjacent streets, after having themselves repeated the signals. Fouquet was made to wait for a moment on the terrace of which we have spoken,--a terrace which abutted on the little corridor, at the end of which the cabinet of the king was located. Here D'Artagnan passed on before the surintendant, whom, till that time, he had respectfully accompanied, and entered the royal cabinet.

"Well?" asked Louis XIV., who, on perceiving him, threw on to the table covered with papers a large green cloth.

"The order is executed, sire."

"And Fouquet?"

"Monsieur le surintendant follows me," said D'Artagnan.

"In ten minutes let him be introduced," said the king, dismissing D'Artagnan again with a gesture. The latter retired; but had scarcely reached the corridor at the extremity of which Fouquet was waiting for him, when he was recalled by the king's bell.

"Did he not appear astonished?" asked the king.

"Who, sire?"

"Fouquet," replied the king, without saying monsieur, a peculiarity which confirmed the captain of the musketeers in his suspicions.

"No, sire," replied he.

"That's well!" And a second time Louis dismissed D'Artagnan.

Fouquet had not quitted the terrace where he had been left by his guide. He reperused his note, conceived thus:

"Something is being contrived against you. Perhaps they will not dare to carry it out at the castle; it will be on your return home. The house is already surrounded by musketeers. Do not enter. A white horse is in waiting for you behind the esplanade!"

Fouquet recognized the writing and zeal of Gourville. Not being willing that, if any evil happened to himself, this paper should compromise a faithful friend, the surintendant was busy tearing it into a thousand morsels, spread about by the wind from the balustrade of the terrace. D'Artagnan found him watching the snowflake fluttering of the last scraps in space.

"Monsieur," said he, "the king awaits you."

Fouquet walked with a deliberate step along the little corridor, where MM. de Brienne and Rose were at work, whilst the Duc de Saint-Aignan, seated on a chair, likewise in the corridor, appeared to be waiting for orders, with feverish impatience, his sword between his legs. It appeared strange to Fouquet that MM. Brienne, Rose, and de Saint-Aignan, in general so attentive and obsequious, should scarcely take the least notice, as he, the surintendant, passed. But how could he expect to find it otherwise among courtiers, he whom the king no longer called anything but Fouquet? He raised his head, determined to look every one and everything bravely in the face, and entered the king's apartment, where a little bell, which we already know, had already announced him to his majesty.

The king, without rising, nodded to him, and with interest: "Well! how are you, Monsieur Fouquet?" said he.

"I am in a high fever," replied the surintendant; "but I am at the king's service."

"That is well; the States assemble to-morrow; have you a speech ready?"

Fouquet looked at the king with astonishment. "I have not, sire," replied he; "but I will improvise one. I am too well acquainted with affairs to feel any embarrassment. I have only one question to ask; will your majesty permit me?"

"Certainly. Ask it."

"Why did not your majesty do his first minister the honor of giving him notice of this in Paris?"

"You were ill; I was not willing to fatigue you."

"Never did a labor--never did an explanation fatigue me, sire; and since the moment is come for me to demand an explanation of my king--"

"Oh, Monsieur Fouquet! an explanation? An explanation, pray, of what?"

"Of your majesty's intentions with respect to myself."

The king blushed. "I have been calumniated," continued Fouquet, warmly, "and I feel called upon to adjure the justice of the king to make inquiries."

"You say all this to me very uselessly, Monsieur Fouquet; I know what I know."

"Your majesty can only know the things that have been told to you; and I, on my part, have said nothing to you, whilst others have spoken many, many times--"

"What do you wish to say?" said the king, impatient to put an end to this embarrassing conversation.

"I will go straight to the facts, sire; and I accuse a certain man of having injured me in your majesty's opinion."

"Nobody has injured you, Monsieur Fouquet."

"That reply proves to me, sire, that I am right."

"Monsieur Fouquet, I do not like people to be accused."

"Not when one is accused?"

"We have already spoken too much about this affair."

"Your majesty will not allow me to justify myself?"

"I repeat that I do not accuse you."

Fouquet, with a half-bow, made a step backward. "It is certain," thought he, "that he has made up his mind. He alone who cannot go back can show such obstinacy. Not to see the danger now would be to be blind indeed; not to shun it would be stupid." He resumed aloud, "Did your majesty send for me on business?"

"No, Monsieur Fouquet, but for some advice I wish to give you."

"I respectfully await it, sire."

"Rest yourself, Monsieur Fouquet, do not throw away your strength; the session of the States will be short, and when my secretaries shall have closed it, I do not wish business to be talked of in France for a

fortnight."

"Has the king nothing to say to me on the subject of this assembly of the States?"

"No, Monsieur Fouquet."

"Not to me, the surintendant of the finances?"

"Rest yourself, I beg you; that is all I have to say to you."

Fouquet bit his lips and hung his head. He was evidently busy with some uneasy thought. This uneasiness struck the king. "Are you angry at having to rest yourself, M. Fouquet?" said he.

"Yes, sire, I am not accustomed to take rest."

"But you are ill; you must take care of yourself."

"Your majesty spoke just now of a speech to be pronounced to-morrow."

His majesty made no reply; this unexpected stroke embarrassed him. Fouquet felt the weight of this hesitation. He thought he could read danger in the eyes of the young prince, which fear would but precipitate. "If I appear frightened, I am lost," thought he.

The king, on his part, was only uneasy at the alarm of Fouquet. "Has he a suspicion of anything?" murmured he.

"If his first word is severe," again thought Fouquet; "if he becomes angry, or feigns to be angry for the sake of a pretext, how shall I extricate myself? Let us smooth the declivity a little. Gourville was right."

"Sire," said he, suddenly, "since the goodness of the king watches over my health to the point of dispensing with my labor, may I not be allowed to be absent from the council of to-morrow? I could pass the day in bed, and will entreat the king to grant me his physician, that we may endeavor to find a remedy against this fearful fever."

"So be it, Monsieur Fouquet, it shall be as you desire; you shall have a holiday to-morrow, you shall have the physician, and shall be restored to health."

"Thanks!" said Fouquet, bowing. Then, opening his game: "Shall I not have the happiness of conducting your majesty to my residence of Belle-Isle?"

And he looked Louis full in the face, to judge of the effect of such a

proposal. The king blushed again.

"Do you know," replied he, endeavoring to smile, "that you have just said, 'My residence of Belle-Isle'?"

"Yes, sire."

"Well! do you not remember," continued the king in the same cheerful tone, "that you gave me Belle-Isle?"

"That is true again, sire. Only, as you have not taken it, you will doubtless come with me and take possession of it."

"I mean to do so."

"That was, besides, your majesty's intention as well as mine; and I cannot express to your majesty how happy and proud I have been to see all the king's regiments from Paris to help take possession."

The king stammered out that he did not bring the musketeers for that alone.

"Oh, I am convinced of that," said Fouquet, warmly; "your majesty knows very well that you have nothing to do but to come alone with a cane in your hand, to bring to the ground all the fortifications of Belle-Isle."

"Peste!" cried the king; "I do not wish those fine fortifications, which cost so much to build, to fall at all. No, let them stand against the Dutch and English. You would not guess what I want to see at Belle-Isle, Monsieur Fouquet; it is the pretty peasants and women of the lands on the sea-shore, who dance so well, and are so seducing with their scarlet petticoats! I have heard great boast of your pretty tenants, monsieur le surintendant; well, let me have a sight of them."

"Whenever your majesty pleases."

"Have you any means of transport? It shall be to-morrow, if you like."

The surintendant felt this stroke, which was not adroit, and replied, "No, sire; I was ignorant of your majesty's wish; above all, I was ignorant of your haste to see Belle-Isle, and I am prepared with nothing."

"You have a boat of your own, nevertheless?"

"I have five; but they are all in port, or at Paimboeuf; and to join them, or bring them hither, would require at least twenty-four hours. Have I any occasion to send a courier? Must I do so?"

"Wait a little, put an end to the fever,--wait till to-morrow."

"That is true. Who knows but that by to-morrow we may not have a hundred other ideas?" replied Fouquet, now perfectly convinced and very pale.

The king started, and stretched his hand out towards his little bell, but Fouquet prevented his ringing.

"Sire," said he, "I have an ague--I am trembling with cold. If I remain a moment longer, I shall most likely faint. I request your majesty's permission to go and fling myself beneath the bedclothes."

"Indeed, you are in a shiver; it is painful to behold! Come, Monsieur Fouquet, begone! I will send to inquire after you."

"Your majesty overwhelms me with kindness. In an hour I shall be better."

"I will call some one to reconduct you," said the king.

"As you please, sire; I would gladly take the arm of any one."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan!" cried the king, ringing his little bell.

"Oh, sire," interrupted Fouquet, laughing in such a manner as made the prince feel cold, "would you give me the captain of your musketeers to take me to my lodgings? An equivocal honor that, sire! A simple footman, I beg."

"And why, M. Fouquet? M. d'Artagnan conducts me often, and extremely well!"

"Yes, but when he conducts you, sire, it is to obey you; whilst me--"

"Go on!"

"If I am obliged to return home supported by the leader of the musketeers, it would be everywhere said you had had me arrested."

"Arrested!" replied the king, who became paler than Fouquet himself,--"arrested! oh!"

"And why should they not say so?" continued Fouquet, still laughing; "and I would lay a wager there would be people found wicked enough to laugh at it." This sally disconcerted the monarch. Fouquet was skillful enough, or fortunate enough, to make Louis XIV. recoil before the appearance of the deed he meditated. M. d'Artagnan, when he appeared, received an order to desire a musketeer to accompany the surintendant.

"Quite unnecessary," said the latter; "sword for sword; I prefer Gourville, who is waiting for me below. But that will not prevent me enjoying the society of M. d'Artagnan. I am glad he will see Belle-Isle, he is so good a judge of fortifications."

D'Artagnan bowed, without at all comprehending what was going on. Fouquet bowed again and left the apartment, affecting all the slowness of a man who walks with difficulty. When once out of the castle, "I am saved!" said he. "Oh! yes, disloyal king, you shall see Belle-Isle, but it shall be when I am no longer there."

He disappeared, leaving D'Artagnan with the king.

"Captain," said the king, "you will follow M. Fouquet at the distance of a hundred paces."

"Yes, sire."

"He is going to his lodgings again. You will go with him."

"Yes, sire."

"You will arrest him in my name, and will shut him up in a carriage."

"In a carriage. Well, sire?"

"In such a fashion that he may not, on the road, either converse with any one or throw notes to people he may meet."

"That will be rather difficult, sire."

"Not at all."

"Pardon me, sire, I cannot stifle M. Fouquet, and if he asks for liberty to breathe, I cannot prevent him by closing both the windows and the blinds. He will throw out at the doors all the cries and notes possible."

"The case is provided for, Monsieur d'Artagnan; a carriage with a trellis will obviate both the difficulties you point out."

"A carriage with an iron trellis!" cried D'Artagnan; "but a carriage with an iron trellis is not made in half an hour, and your majesty commands me to go immediately to M. Fouquet's lodgings."

"The carriage in question is already made."

"Ah! that is quite a different thing," said the captain; "if the carriage is ready made, very well, then, we have only to set it in

motion."

"It is ready--and the horses harnessed."

"Ah!"

"And the coachman, with the outriders, is waiting in the lower court of the castle."

D'Artagnan bowed. "There only remains for me to ask your majesty whither I shall conduct M. Fouquet."

"To the castle of Angers, at first."

"Very well, sire."

"Afterwards we will see."

"Yes, sire."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, one last word: you have remarked that, for making this capture of M. Fouquet, I have not employed my guards, on which account M. de Gesvres will be furious."

"Your majesty does not employ your guards," said the captain, a little humiliated, "because you mistrust M. de Gesvres, that is all."

"That is to say, monsieur, that I have more confidence in you."

"I know that very well, sire! and it is of no use to make so much of it."

"It is only for the sake of arriving at this, monsieur, that if, from this moment, it should happen that by any chance whatever M. Fouquet should escape--such chances have been, monsieur--"

"Oh! very often, sire; but for others, not for me."

"And why not with you?"

"Because I, sire, have, for an instant, wished to save M. Fouquet."

The king started. "Because," continued the captain, "I had then a right to do so, having guessed your majesty's plan, without you having spoken to me of it, and that I took an interest in M. Fouquet. Now, was I not at liberty to show my interest in this man?"

"In truth, monsieur, you do not reassure me with regard to your services."



"If I had saved him then, I should have been perfectly innocent; I will say more, I should have done well, for M. Fouquet is not a bad man. But he was not willing; his destiny prevailed; he let the hour of liberty slip by. So much the worse! Now I have orders, I will obey those orders, and M. Fouquet you may consider as a man arrested. He is at the castle of Angers, this very M. Fouquet."

"Oh! you have not got him yet, captain."

"That concerns me; every one to his trade, sire; only, once more, reflect! Do you seriously give me orders to arrest M. Fouquet, sire?"

"Yes, a thousand times, yes!"

"In writing, sire, then."

"Here is the order."

D'Artagnan read it, bowed to the king, and left the room. From the height of the terrace he perceived Gourville, who went by with a joyous air towards the lodgings of M. Fouquet.