

Chapter 41

Wherein May Be Seen that a Bargain Which Cannot Be Made with One Person,

Can Be Carried Out with Another.

Aramis had been perfectly correct in his supposition; for hardly had she left the house in the Place Baudoyer than Madame de Chevreuse proceeded homeward. She was doubtless afraid of being followed, and by this means thought she might succeed in throwing those who might be following her off their guard; but scarcely had she arrived within the door of the hotel, and hardly had assured herself that no one who could cause her any uneasiness was on her track, when she opened the door of the garden, leading into another street, and hurried towards the Rue Croix des Petits-Champs, where M. Colbert resided.

We have already said that evening, or rather night, had closed in; it was a dark, thick night, besides; Paris had once more sunk into its calm, quiescent state, enshrouding alike within its indulgent mantle the high-born duchesse carrying out her political intrigue, and the simple citizen's wife, who, having been detained late by a supper in the city, was making her way slowly homewards, hanging on the arm of a lover, by the shortest possible route. Madame de Chevreuse had been too well accustomed to nocturnal political intrigues to be ignorant that a minister never denies himself, even at his own private residence, to any young and beautiful woman who may chance to object to the dust and confusion of a public office, or to old women, as full of experience as

of years, who dislike the indiscreet echo of official residences. A valet received the duchesse under the peristyle, and received her, it must be admitted, with some indifference of manner; he intimated, after having looked at her face, that it was hardly at such an hour that one so advanced in years as herself could be permitted to disturb Monsieur Colbert's important occupations. But Madame de Chevreuse, without looking or appearing to be annoyed, wrote her name upon a leaf of her tablets - a name which had but too frequently sounded so disagreeably in the ears of Louis XIII. and of the great cardinal. She wrote her name in the large, ill-formed characters of the higher classes of that period, handed it to the valet, without uttering a word, but with so haughty and imperious a gesture, that the fellow, well accustomed to judge of people from their manners and appearance, perceived at once the quality of the person before him, bowed his head, and ran to M. Colbert's room. The minister could not control a sudden exclamation as he opened the paper; and the valet, gathering from it the interest with which his master regarded the mysterious visitor, returned as fast as he could to beg the duchesse to follow him. She ascended to the first floor of the beautiful new house very slowly, rested herself on the landing-place, in order not to enter the apartment out of breath, and appeared before M. Colbert, who, with his own hands, held both the folding doors open. The duchesse paused at the threshold, for the purpose of well studying the character of the man with whom she was about to converse. At the first glance, the round, large, heavy head, thick brows, and ill-favored features of Colbert, who wore, thrust low down on his head, a cap like a priest's _calotte_, seemed to indicate that but little difficulty was likely to be

met with in her negotiations with him, but also that she was to expect as little interest in the discussion of particulars; for there was scarcely any indication that the rough and uncouth nature of the man was susceptible to the impulses of a refined revenge, or of an exalted ambition. But when, on closer inspection, the duchesse perceived the small, piercingly black eyes, the longitudinal wrinkles of his high and massive forehead, the imperceptible twitching of the lips, on which were apparent traces of rough good-humor, Madame de Chevreuse altered her opinion of him, and felt she could say to herself: "I have found the man I want."

"What is the subject, madame, which procures me the honor of a visit from you?" he inquired.

"The need I have you of you, monsieur," returned the duchesse, "as well as that which you have of me."

"I am delighted, madame, with the first portion of your sentence; but, as far as the second portion is concerned - "

Madame de Chevreuse sat down in the armchair which M. Colbert advanced towards her. "Monsieur Colbert, you are the intendant of finances, and are ambitious of becoming the superintendent?"

"Madame!"

"Nay, do not deny it; that would only unnecessarily prolong our conversation, and that is useless."

"And yet, madame, however well-disposed and inclined to show politeness I may be towards a lady of your position and merit, nothing will make me confess that I have ever entertained the idea of supplanting my superior."

"I said nothing about supplanting, Monsieur Colbert. Could I accidentally have made use of that word? I hardly think that likely. The word 'replace' is less aggressive in its signification, and more grammatically suitable, as M. de Voiture would say. I presume, therefore, that you are ambitious of replacing M. Fouquet."

"M. Fouquet's fortune, madame, enables him to withstand all attempts. The superintendent in this age plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; the vessels pass beneath him and do not overthrow him."

"I ought to have availed myself precisely of that very comparison. It is true, M. Fouquet plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; but I remember to have heard it said by M. Conrart, a member of the academy, I believe, that when the Colossus of Rhodes fell from its lofty position, the merchant who had cast it down - a merchant, nothing more, M. Colbert - loaded four hundred camels with the ruins. A merchant! and that is considerably less than an intendant of finances."

"Madame, I can assure you that I shall never overthrow M. Fouquet."

"Very good, Monsieur Colbert, since you persist in showing so much sensitiveness with me, as if you were ignorant that I am Madame de Chevreuse, and also that I am somewhat advanced in years; in other words, that you have to do with a woman who has had political dealings with the Cardinal Richelieu, and who has no time to lose; as, I repeat, you do not hesitate to commit such an imprudence, I shall go and find others who are more intelligent and more desirous of making their fortunes."

"How, madame, how?"

"You give me a very poor idea of negotiations of the present day. I assure you that if, in my earlier days, a woman had gone to M. de Cinq-Mars, who was not, moreover, a man of a very high order of intellect, and had said to him about the cardinal what I have just said to you of M. Fouquet, M. de Cinq-Mars would by this time have already set actively to work."

"Nay, madame, show a little indulgence, I entreat you."

"Well, then, do you really consent to replace M. Fouquet?"

"Certainly, I do, if the king dismisses M. Fouquet."

"Again, a word too much; it is quite evident that, if you have not yet succeeded in driving M. Fouquet from his post, it is because you have not

been able to do so. Therefore, I should be the greatest simpleton possible if, in coming to you, I did not bring the very thing you require."

"I am distressed to be obliged to persist, madame," said Colbert, after a silence which enabled the duchesse to sound the depths of his dissimulation, "but I must warn you that, for the last six years, denunciation after denunciation has been made against M. Fouquet, and he has remained unshaken and unaffected by them."

"There is a time for everything, Monsieur Colbert; those who were the authors of those denunciations were not called Madame de Chevreuse, and they had no proofs equal to the six letters from M. de Mazarin which establish the offense in question."

"The offense!"

"The crime, if you like it better."

"The crime! committed by M. Fouquet!"

"Nothing less. It is rather strange, M. Colbert, but your face, which just now was cold and indifferent, is now positively the very reverse."

"A crime!"

"I am delighted to see that it makes an impression upon you."

"It is because that word, madame, embraces so many things."

"It embraces the post of superintendent of finance for yourself, and a letter of exile, or the Bastille, for M. Fouquet."

"Forgive me, madame la duchesse, but it is almost impossible that M. Fouquet can be exiled; to be imprisoned or disgraced, that is already a great deal."

"Oh, I am perfectly aware of what I am saying," returned Madame de Chevreuse, coldly. "I do not live at such a distance from Paris as not to know what takes place there. The king does not like M. Fouquet, and he would willingly sacrifice M. Fouquet if an opportunity were only given him."

"It must be a good one, though."

"Good enough, and one I estimate to be worth five hundred thousand francs."

"In what way?" said Colbert.

"I mean, monsieur, that holding this opportunity in my own hands, I will not allow it to be transferred to yours except for a sum of five hundred

thousand francs."

"I understand you perfectly, madame. But since you have fixed a price for the sale, let me now see the value of the articles to be sold."

"Oh, a mere trifle; six letters, as I have already told you, from M. de Mazarin; and the autographs will most assuredly not be regarded as too highly priced, if they establish, in an irrefutable manner, that M. Fouquet has embezzled large sums of money from the treasury and appropriated them to his own purposes."

"In an irrefutable manner, do you say?" observed Colbert, whose eyes sparkled with delight.

"Perfectly so; would you like to read the letters?"

"With all my heart! Copies, of course?"

"Of course, the copies," said the duchesse, as she drew from her bosom a small packet of papers flattened by her velvet bodice. "Read," she said.

Colbert eagerly snatched the papers and devoured them. "Excellent!" he said.

"It is clear enough, is it not?"

"Yes, madame, yes; M. Mazarin must have handed the money to M. Fouquet, who must have kept it for his own purposes; but the question is, what money?"

"Exactly, - what money; if we come to terms I will join to these six letters a seventh, which will supply you with the fullest particulars."

Colbert reflected. "And the originals of these letters?"

"A useless question to ask; exactly as if I were to ask you, Monsieur Colbert, whether the money-bags you will give me will be full or empty."

"Very good, madame."

"Is it concluded?"

"No; for there is one circumstance to which neither of us has given any attention."

"Name it!"

"M. Fouquet can be utterly ruined, under the legal circumstances you have detailed, only by means of legal proceedings."

"Well?"

"A public scandal, for instance; and yet neither the legal proceedings nor the scandal can be commenced against him."

"Why not?"

"Because he is procureur-general of the parliament; because, too, in France, all public administrators, the army, justice itself, and commerce, are intimately connected by ties of good-fellowship, which people call *_esprit de corps_*. In such a case, madame, the parliament will never permit its chief to be dragged before a public tribunal; and never, even if he be dragged there by royal authority, never, I say, will he be condemned."

"Well, Monsieur Colbert, I do not see what I have to do with that."

"I am aware of that, madame; but I have to do with it, and it consequently diminishes the value of what you have brought to show me. What good can a proof of a crime be to me, without the possibility of obtaining a condemnation?"

"Even if he be only suspected, M. Fouquet will lose his post of superintendent."

"Is that all?" exclaimed Colbert, whose dark, gloomy features were momentarily lighted up by an expression of hate and vengeance."

"Ah! ah! Monsieur Colbert," said the duchesse, "forgive me, but I did not think you were so impressionable. Very good; in that case, since you need more than I have to give you, there is no occasion to speak of the matter at all."

"Yes, madame, we will go on talking of it; only, as the value of your commodities had decreased, you must lower your pretensions."

"You are bargaining, then?"

"Every man who wishes to deal loyally is obliged to do so."

"How much will you offer me?"

"Two hundred thousand francs," said Colbert.

The duchesse laughed in his face, and then said, suddenly, "Wait a moment, I have another arrangement to propose; will you give me three hundred thousand francs?"

"No, no."

"Oh, you can either accept or refuse my terms; besides, that is not all."

"More still! you are becoming too impracticable to deal with, madame."

"Less so than you think, perhaps, for it is not money I am going to ask you for."

"What is it, then?"

"A service; you know that I have always been most affectionately attached to the queen, and I am desirous of having an interview with her majesty."

"With the queen?"

"Yes, Monsieur Colbert, with the queen, who is, I admit, no longer my friend, and who has ceased to be so for a long time past, but who may again become so if the opportunity be only given her."

"Her majesty has ceased to receive any one, madame. She is a great sufferer, and you may be aware that the paroxysms of her disease occur with greater frequency than ever."

"That is the very reason why I wish to have an interview with her majesty; for in Flanders there is a great variety of these kinds of complaints."

"What, cancers - a fearful, incurable disorder?"

"Do not believe that, Monsieur Colbert. The Flemish peasant is somewhat a man of nature, and his companion for life is not alone a wife, but a

female laborer also; for while he is smoking his pipe, the woman works: it is she who draws the water from the well; she who loads the mule or the ass, and even bears herself a portion of the burden. Taking but little care of herself, she gets knocked about first in one direction, and then in another, and very often is beaten by her husband, and cancers frequently rise from contusions."

"True, true," said Colbert.

"The Flemish women do not die the sooner on that account. When they are great sufferers from this disease they go in search of remedies, and the Beguines of Bruges are excellent doctors for every kind of disease. They have precious waters of one sort or another; specifics of various kinds; and they give a bottle of it and a wax candle to the sufferer, whereby the priests are gainers, and Heaven is served by the disposal of both their wares. I will take the queen some of this holy water, which I will procure from the Beguines of Bruges; her majesty will recover, and will burn as many wax candles as she may see fit. You see, Monsieur Colbert, to prevent my seeing the queen is almost as bad as committing the crime of regicide."

"You are undoubtedly, madame la duchesse, a woman of exceedingly great abilities, and I am more than astounded at their display; still I cannot but suppose that this charitable consideration towards the queen in some measure covers a slight personal interest for yourself."

"I have not given myself the trouble to conceal it, that I am aware of, Monsieur Colbert. You said, I believe, that I had a slight personal interest? On the contrary, it is a very great interest, and I will prove it to you, by resuming what I was saying. If you procure me a personal interview with her majesty, I will be satisfied with the three hundred thousand francs I have claimed; if not, I shall keep my letters, unless, indeed, you give me, on the spot, five hundred thousand francs."

And rising from her seat with this decisive remark, the old duchesse plunged M. Colbert into a disagreeable perplexity. To bargain any further was out of the question; and not to bargain was to pay a great deal too dearly for them. "Madame," he said, "I shall have the pleasure of handing over a hundred thousand crowns; but how shall I get the actual letters themselves?"

"In the simplest manner in the world, my dear Monsieur Colbert - whom will you trust?"

The financier began to laugh, silently, so that his large eyebrows went up and down like the wings of a bat, upon the deep lines of his yellow forehead. "No one," he said.

"You surely will make an exception in your own favor, Monsieur Colbert?"

"In what way, madame?"

"I mean that, if you would take the trouble to accompany me to the place where the letters are, they would be delivered into your own hands, and you would be able to verify and check them."

"Quite true."

"You would bring the hundred thousand crowns with you at the same time, for I, too, do not trust any one."

Colbert colored to the tips of his ears. Like all eminent men in the art of figures, he was of an insolent and mathematical probity. "I will take with me, madame," he said, "two orders for the amount agreed upon, payable at my treasury. Will that satisfy you?"

"Would that the orders on your treasury were for two millions, monsieur l'intendant! I shall have the pleasure of showing you the way, then?"

"Allow me to order my carriage?"

"I have a carriage below, monsieur."

Colbert coughed like an irresolute man. He imagined, for a moment, that the proposition of the duchesse was a snare; that perhaps some one was waiting at the door; and that she whose secret had just been sold to Colbert for a hundred thousand crowns, had already offered it to Fouquet for the same sum. As he still hesitated, the duchesse looked at him full

in the face.

"You prefer your own carriage?" she said.

"I admit I _do_."

"You suppose I am going to lead you into a snare or trap of some sort or other?"

"Madame la duchesse, you have the character of being somewhat inconsiderate at times, as I am reputed a sober, solemn character, a jest or practical joke might compromise me."

"Yes; the fact is, you are afraid. Well, then, take your own carriage, as many servants as you like, only think well of what I am going to say. What we two may arrange between ourselves, we are the only persons who will know - if a third person is present we might as well tell the whole world about it. After all, I do not make a point of it; my carriage shall follow yours, and I shall be satisfied to accompany you in your own carriage to the queen."

"To the queen?"

"Have you forgotten that already? Is it possible that one of the clauses of the agreement of so much importance to me, can have escaped you so soon? How trifling it seems to you, indeed; if I had known it I should

have asked double what I have done."

"I have reflected, madame, and I shall not accompany you."

"Really - and why not?"

"Because I have the most perfect confidence in you."

"You overpower me. But - provided I receive the hundred thousand crowns?"

"Here they are, madame," said Colbert, scribbling a few lines on a piece of paper, which he handed to the duchesse, adding, "You are paid."

"The trait is a fine one, Monsieur Colbert, and I will reward you for it," she said, beginning to laugh.

Madame de Chevreuse's laugh was a very sinister sound; a man with youth, faith, love, life itself, throbbing in his heart, would prefer a sob to such a lamentable laugh. The duchesse opened the front of her dress and drew forth from her bosom, somewhat less white than it once had been, a small packet of papers, tied with a flame-colored ribbon, and, still laughing, she said, "There, Monsieur Colbert, are the originals of Cardinal Mazarin's letters; they are now your own property," she added, refastening the body of her dress; "your fortune is secured. And now accompany me to the queen."

"No, madame; if you are again about to run the chance of her majesty's displeasure, and it were known at the Palais Royal that I had been the means of introducing you there, the queen would never forgive me while she lived. No; there are certain persons at the palace who are devoted to me, who will procure you an admission without my being compromised."

"Just as you please, provided I enter."

"What do you term those religious women at Bruges who cure disorders?"

"Beguines."

"Good; are you one?"

"As you please, - but I must soon cease to be one."

"That is your affair."

"Excuse me, but I do not wish to be exposed to a refusal."

"That is again your own affair, madame. I am going to give directions to the head valet of the gentleman in waiting on the queen to allow admission to a Beguine, who brings an effectual remedy for her majesty's sufferings. You are the bearer of my letter, you will undertake to be provided with the remedy, and will give every explanation on the subject. I admit a knowledge of a Beguine, but I deny all knowledge of

Madame de Chevreuse. Here, madame, then, is your letter of introduction."