

Chapter 42

The Skin of the Bear.

Colbert handed the duchesse the letter, and gently drew aside the chair behind which she was standing; Madame de Chevreuse, with a very slight bow, immediately left the room. Colbert, who had recognized Mazarin's handwriting, and had counted the letters, rang to summon his secretary, whom he enjoined to go in immediate search of M. Vanel, a counselor of the parliament. The secretary replied that, according to his usual practice, M. Vanel had just that moment entered the house, in order to give the intendant an account of the principal details of the business which had been transacted during the day in parliament. Colbert approached one of the lamps, read the letters of the deceased cardinal over again, smiled repeatedly as he recognized the great value of the papers Madame de Chevreuse had just delivered - and burying his head in his hands for a few minutes, reflected profoundly. In the meantime, a tall, loosely-made man entered the room; his spare, thin face, steady look, and hooked nose, as he entered Colbert's cabinet, with a modest assurance of manner, revealed a character at once supple and decided, - supple towards the master who could throw him the prey, firm towards the dogs who might possibly be disposed to dispute its possession. M. Vanel carried a voluminous bundle of papers under his arm, and placed it on the desk on which Colbert was leaning both his elbows, as he supported his head.

"Good day, M. Vanel," said the latter, rousing himself from his

meditation.

"Good day, monseigneur," said Vanel, naturally.

"You should say monsieur, and not monseigneur," replied Colbert, gently.

"We give the title of monseigneur to ministers," returned Vanel, with extreme self-possession, "and you are a minister."

"Not yet."

"You are so in point of fact, and I call you monseigneur accordingly; besides you are seigneur for me, and that is sufficient; if you dislike my calling you monseigneur before others, allow me, at least, to call you so in private."

Colbert raised his head as if to read, or try to read, upon Vanel's face how much or how little sincerity entered into this protestation of devotion. But the counselor knew perfectly well how to sustain the weight of such a look, even backed with the full authority of the title he had conferred. Colbert sighed; he could not read anything in Vanel's face, and Vanel might possibly be honest in his professions, but Colbert recollected that this man, inferior to himself in every other respect, was actually his master in virtue of the fact of his having a wife. As he was pitying this man's lot, Vanel coldly drew from his pocket a perfumed letter, sealed with Spanish wax, and held it towards Colbert,

saying, "A letter from my wife, monseigneur."

Colbert coughed, took, opened and read the letter, and then put it carefully away in his pocket, while Vanel turned over the leaves of the papers he had brought with him with an unmoved and unconcerned air. "Vanel," he said suddenly to his _protege_, "you are a hard-working man, I know; would twelve hours' daily labor frighten you?"

"I work fifteen hours every day."

"Impossible. A counselor need not work more than three hours a day in parliament."

"Oh! I am working up some returns for a friend of mine in the department of accounts, and, as I still have spare time on my hands, I am studying Hebrew."

"Your reputation stands high in the parliament, Vanel."

"I believe so, monseigneur."

"You must not grow rusty in your post of counselor."

"What must I do to avoid it?"

"Purchase a high place. Mean and low ambitions are very difficult to

satisfy."

"Small purses are the most difficult ones to fill, monseigneur."

"What post have you in view?" said Colbert.

"I see none - not one."

"There is one, certainly, but one need be almost the king himself to be able to buy it without inconvenience; and the king will not be inclined, I suppose, to purchase the post of procureur-general."

At these words, Vanel fixed his peculiar, humble, dull look upon Colbert, who could hardly tell whether Vanel comprehended him or not. "Why do you speak to me, monseigneur," said Vanel, "of the post of procureur-general to the parliament; I know no other post than the one M. Fouquet fills."

"Exactly so, my dear counselor."

"You are not over fastidious, monseigneur; but before the post can be bought, it must be offered for sale."

"I believe, Monsieur Vanel, that it will be for sale before long."

"For sale! What! M. Fouquet's post of procureur-general?"

"So it is _said_."

"The post which renders him so perfectly invincible, for sale! Ha, ha!"
said Vanel, beginning to laugh.

"Would you be afraid, then, of the post?" said Colbert, gravely.

"Afraid! no; but - "

"Are you desirous of obtaining it?"

"You are laughing at me, monseigneur," replied Vanel. "Is it likely that
a counselor of the parliament would not be desirous of becoming procureur-
general?"

"Well, Monsieur Vanel, since I tell you that the post, as report goes,
will be shortly for sale - "

"I cannot help repeating, monseigneur, that it is impossible; a man never
throws away the buckler, behind which he maintains his honor, his
fortune, his very life."

"There are certain men mad enough, Vanel, to fancy themselves out of the
reach of all mischances."

"Yes, monseigneur; but such men never commit their mad acts for the

advantage of the poor Vanel's of the world."

"Why not?"

"For the very reason that those Vanel's are poor."

"It is true that M. Fouquet's post might cost a good round sum. What would you bid for it, Monsieur Vanel?"

"Everything I am worth."

"Which means?"

"Three or four hundred thousand francs."

"And the post is worth - "

"A million and a half, at the very lowest. I know persons who have offered one million seven hundred thousand francs, without being able to persuade M. Fouquet to sell. Besides, supposing it were to happen that M. Fouquet wished to sell, which I do not believe, in spite of what I have been told - "

"Ah! you have heard something about it, then; who told you?"

"M. de Gourville, M. Pelisson, and others."

"Very good; if, therefore, M. Fouquet did wish to sell - "

"I could not buy it just yet, since the superintendent will only sell for ready money, and no one has a million and a half to put down at once."

Colbert suddenly interrupted the counselor by an imperious gesture; he had begun to meditate. Observing his superior's serious attitude, and his perseverance in continuing the conversation on this subject, Vanel awaited the solution without venturing to precipitate it.

"Explain to me the privileges which this post confers."

"The right of impeaching every French subject who is not a prince of the blood; the right of quashing all proceedings taken against any Frenchman, who is neither king nor prince. The procureur-general is the king's right hand to punish the guilty; the office is the means whereby also he can evade the administration of justice. M. Fouquet, therefore, would be able, by stirring up parliament, to maintain himself even against the king; and the king could as easily, by humoring M. Fouquet, get his edicts registered in spite of every opposition and objection. The procureur-general can be made a very useful or a very dangerous instrument."

"Vanel, would you like to be procureur-general?" said Colbert, suddenly, softening both his look and his voice."

"I!" exclaimed the latter; "I have already had the honor to represent to you that I want about eleven hundred thousand francs to make up the amount."

"Borrow that sum from your friends."

"I have no friends richer than myself."

"You are an honest and honorable man, Vanel."

"Ah! monseigneur, if the world would only think as you do!"

"I think so, and that is quite enough; and if it should be needed, I will be your security."

"Do not forget the proverb, monseigneur."

"What is it?"

"That he who becomes responsible for another has to pay for his fancy."

"Let that make no difference."

Vanel rose, bewildered by this offer which had been so suddenly and unexpectedly made to him. "You are not trifling with me, monseigneur?"

he said.

"Stay; you say that M. Gourville has spoken to you about M. Fouquet's post?"

"Yes; and M. Pelisson, also."

"Officially so, or only through their own suggestion?"

"These were their very words: 'The parliament members are as proud as they are wealthy; they ought to club together two or three millions among themselves, to present to their protector and leader, M. Fouquet.'"

"And what did you reply?"

"I said that, for my own part, I would give ten thousand francs if necessary."

"Ah! you like M. Fouquet, then!" exclaimed Colbert, with a look of hatred.

"No; but M. Fouquet is our chief. He is in debt - is on the high road to ruin; and we ought to save the honor of the body of which we are members."

"Exactly; and that explains why M. Fouquet will be always safe and sound, so long as he occupies his present post," replied Colbert.

"Thereupon," said Vanel, "M. Gourville added, 'If we were to do anything out of charity to M. Fouquet, it could not be otherwise than most humiliating to him; and he would be sure to refuse it. Let the parliament subscribe among themselves to purchase, in a proper manner, the post of procureur-general; in that case, all would go well; the honor of our body would be saved, and M. Fouquet's pride spared.'"

"That is an opening."

"I considered it so, monseigneur."

"Well, Monsieur Vanel, you will go at once, and find out either M. Gourville or M. Pelisson. Do you know any other friend of M. Fouquet?"

"I know M. de la Fontaine very well."

"La Fontaine, the rhymester?"

"Yes; he used to write verses to my wife, when M. Fouquet was one of our friends."

"Go to him, then, and try and procure an interview with the superintendent."

"Willingly - but the sum itself?"

"On the day and hour you arrange to settle the matter, Monsieur Vanel, you shall be supplied with the money, so do not make yourself uneasy on _that_ account."

"Monseigneur, such munificence! You eclipse kings even - you surpass M. Fouquet himself."

"Stay a moment - do not let us mistake each other: I do not make you a present of fourteen hundred thousand francs, Monsieur Vanel; for I have children to provide for - but I will _lend_ you that sum."

"Ask whatever interest, whatever security you please, monseigneur; I am quite ready. And when all your requisitions are satisfied, I will still repeat, that you surpass kings and M. Fouquet in munificence. What conditions do you impose?"

"The repayment in eight years, and a mortgage upon the appointment itself."

"Certainly. Is that all?"

"Wait a moment. I reserve to myself the right of purchasing the post from you at one hundred and fifty thousand francs profit for yourself, if, in your mode of filling the office, you do not follow out a line of conduct in conformity with the interests of the king and with my projects."

"Ah-h!" said Vanel, in an altered tone.

"Is there anything in that which can possibly be objectionable to you, Monsieur Vanel?" said Colbert, coldly.

"Oh! no, no," replied Vanel, nervously.

"Very good. We will sign an agreement to that effect whenever you like. And now go as quickly as you can to M. Fouquet's friend, obtain an interview with the superintendent; do not be too difficult in making whatever concessions may be required of you; and when once the arrangements are all made - "

"I will press him to sign."

"Be most careful to do nothing of the kind; do not speak of signatures with M. Fouquet, nor of deeds, nor even ask him to pass his word. Understand this: otherwise you will lose everything. All you have to do is to get M. Fouquet to give you his hand on the matter. Go, go."