

Chapter 45

How Jean de La Fontaine Came to Write His First Tale.

All these intrigues are exhausted; the human mind, so variously complicated, has been enabled to develop itself at its ease in the three outlines with which our recital has supplied it. It is not unlikely that, in the future we are now preparing, a question of politics and intrigues may still arise, but the springs by which they work will be so carefully concealed that no one will be able to see aught but flowers and paintings, just as at a theater, where a colossus appears upon the scene, walking along moved by the small legs and slender arms of a child concealed within the framework.

We now return to Saint-Mande, where the superintendent was in the habit of receiving his select confederacy of epicureans. For some time past the host had met with nothing but trouble. Every one in the house was aware of and felt for the minister's distress. No more magnificent or recklessly improvident _reunions_. Money had been the pretext assigned by Fouquet, and never _was_ any pretext, as Gourville said, more fallacious, for there was not even a shadow of money to be seen.

M. Vatel was resolutely painstaking in keeping up the reputation of the house, and yet the gardeners who supplied the kitchens complained of ruinous delays. The agents for the supply of Spanish wines sent drafts which no one honored; fishermen, whom the superintendent engaged on the coast of Normandy, calculated that if they were paid all that was due to

them, the amount would enable them to retire comfortably for life; fish, which, at a later period, was the cause of Vatel's death, did not arrive at all. However, on the ordinary reception days, Fouquet's friends flocked in more numerous than ever. Gourville and the Abbe Fouquet talked over money matters - that is to say, the abbe borrowed a few pistoles from Gourville; Pelisson, seated with his legs crossed, was engaged in finishing the peroration of a speech with which Fouquet was to open the parliament; and this speech was a masterpiece, because Pelisson wrote it for his friend - that is to say, he inserted all kinds of clever things the latter would most certainly never have taken the trouble to say of his own accord. Presently Loret and La Fontaine would enter from the garden, engaged in a dispute about the art of making verses. The painters and musicians, in their turn, were hovering near the dining-room. As soon as eight o'clock struck the supper would be announced, for the superintendent never kept any one waiting. It was already half-past seven, and the appetites of the guests were beginning to declare themselves in an emphatic manner. As soon as all the guests were assembled, Gourville went straight up to Pelisson, awoke him out of his reverie, and led him into the middle of a room, and closed the doors.

"Well," he said, "anything new?"

Pelisson raised his intelligent and gentle face, and said: "I have borrowed five and twenty thousand francs of my aunt, and I have them here in good sterling money."

"Good," replied Gourville; "we only want one hundred and ninety-five

thousand livres for the first payment."

"The payment of what?" asked La Fontaine.

"What! absent-minded as usual! Why, it was you who told us the small estate at Corbeli was going to be sold by one of M. Fouquet's creditors; and you, also, who proposed that all his friends should subscribe - more than that, it was you who said that you would sell a corner of your house at Chateau-Thierry, in order to furnish your own proportion, and you come and ask - '_The payment of what?_'"

This remark was received with a general laugh, which made La Fontaine blush. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I had not forgotten it; oh, no! only - "

"Only you remembered nothing about it," replied Loret.

"That is the truth, and the fact is, he is quite right, there is a great difference between forgetting and not remembering."

"Well, then," added Pelisson, "you bring your mite in the shape of the price of the piece of land you have sold?"

"Sold? no!"

"Have you not sold the field, then?" inquired Gourville, in astonishment,

for he knew the poet's disinterestedness.

"My wife would not let me," replied the latter, at which there were fresh bursts of laughter.

"And yet you went to Chateau-Thierry for that purpose," said some one.

"Certainly I did, and on horseback."

"Poor fellow!"

"I had eight different horses, and I was almost bumped to death."

"You are an excellent fellow! And you rested yourself when you arrived there?"

"Rested! Oh! of course I did, for I had an immense deal of work to do."

"How so?"

"My wife had been flirting with the man to whom I wished to sell the land. The fellow drew back from his bargain, and so I challenged him."

"Very good, and you fought?"

"It seems not."

"You know nothing about it, I suppose?"

"No, my wife and her relations interfered in the matter. I was kept a quarter of an hour with my sword in my hand; but I was not wounded."

"And your adversary?"

"Oh! he wasn't wounded either, for he never came on the field."

"Capital!" cried his friends from all sides, "you must have been terribly angry."

"Exceedingly so; I caught cold; I returned home and then my wife began to quarrel with me."

"In real earnest?"

"Yes, in real earnest. She threw a loaf of bread at my head, a large loaf."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh! I upset the table over her and her guests; and then I got on my horse again, and here I am."

Every one had great difficulty in keeping his countenance at the exposure of this heroi-comedy, and when the laughter had subsided, one of the guests present said to La Fontaine: "Is that all you have brought back?"

"Oh, no! I have an excellent idea in my head."

"What is it?"

"Have you noticed that there is a good deal of sportive, jesting poetry written in France?"

"Yes, of course," replied every one.

"And," pursued La Fontaine, "only a very small portion of it is printed."

"The laws are strict, you know."

"That may be; but a rare article is a dear article, and that is the reason why I have written a small poem, excessively free in its style, very broad, and extremely cynical in its tone."

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes," continued the poet, with assumed indifference, "and I have introduced the greatest freedom of language I could possibly employ."

Peals of laughter again broke forth, while the poet was thus announcing the quality of his wares. "And," he continued, "I have tried to excel everything that Boccaccio, Aretin, and other masters of their craft have written in the same style."

"Its fate is clear," said Pelisson; "it will be suppressed and forbidden."

"Do you think so?" said La Fontaine, simply. "I assure you I did not do it on my own account so much as M. Fouquet's."

This wonderful conclusion again raised the mirth of all present.

"And I have sold the first edition of this little book for eight hundred livres," exclaimed La Fontaine, rubbing his hands together. "Serious and religious books sell at about half that rate."

"It would have been better," said Gourville, "to have written two religious books instead."

"It would have been too long, and not amusing enough," replied La Fontaine tranquilly; "my eight hundred livres are in this little bag, and I beg to offer them as my contribution."

As he said this, he placed his offering in the hands of their treasurer; it was then Loret's turn, who gave a hundred and fifty livres; the others stripped themselves in the same way; and the total sum in the purse

amounted to forty thousand livres. The money was still being counted over when the superintendent noiselessly entered the room; he had heard everything; and then this man, who had possessed so many millions, who had exhausted all the pleasures and honors the world had to bestow, this generous heart, this inexhaustible brain, which had, like two burning crucibles, devoured the material and moral substance of the first kingdom in Europe, was seen to cross the threshold with tears in his eyes, and pass his fingers through the gold and silver which the bag contained.

"Poor offering," he said, in a softened and affected tone of voice, "you will disappear into the smallest corner of my empty purse, but you have filled to overflowing that which no one can ever exhaust, my heart. Thank you, my friends - thank you." And as he could not embrace every one present, who were all tearful, too, philosophers as they were, he embraced La Fontaine, saying to him, "Poor fellow! so you have, on my account, been beaten by your wife and censured by your confessor."

"Oh! it is a mere nothing," replied the poet; "if your creditors will only wait a couple of years, I shall have written a hundred other tales, which, at two editions each, will pay off the debt."