

Chapter 46

La Fontaine in the Character of a Negotiator.

Fouquet pressed La Fontaine's hand most warmly, saying to him, "My dear poet, write a hundred other tales, not only for the eighty pistoles which each of them will produce you, but, still more, to enrich our language with a hundred new masterpieces of composition."

"Oh!" said La Fontaine, with a little air of pride, "you must not suppose that I have only brought this idea and the eighty pistoles to the superintendent."

"Oh! indeed," was the general acclimation from all parts of the room, "M. de la Fontaine is in funds to-day."

"Exactly," replied La Fontaine.

"Quick, quick!" cried the assembly.

"Take care," said Pelisson in La Fontaine's ear; "you have had a most brilliant success up to the present moment; do not go beyond your depth."

"Not at all, Monsieur Pelisson; and you, who are a man of decided taste, will be the first to approve of what I have done."

"We are talking of millions, remember," said Gourville.

"I have fifteen hundred thousand francs here, Monsieur Gourville," he replied, striking himself on the chest.

"The deuce take this Gascon from Chateau-Thierry!" cried Loret.

"It is not the pocket you must tap - but the brain," said Fouquet.

"Stay a moment, monsieur le surintendant," added La Fontaine; "you are not procureur-general - you are a poet."

"True, true!" cried Loret, Conrart, and every person present connected with literature.

"You are, I repeat, a poet and a painter, a sculptor, a friend of the arts and sciences; but, acknowledge that you are no lawyer."

"Oh! I do acknowledge it," replied M. Fouquet, smiling.

"If you were to be nominated at the Academy, you would refuse, I think."

"I think I should, with all due deference to the academicians."

"Very good; if, therefore, you do not wish to belong to the Academy, why do you allow yourself to form one of the parliament?"

"Oh!" said Pelisson, "we are talking politics."

"I wish to know whether the barrister's gown does or does not become M. Fouquet."

"There is no question of the gown at all," retorted Pelisson, annoyed at the laughter of those who were present.

"On the contrary, it is the gown," said Loret.

"Take the gown away from the procureur-general," said Conrart, "and we have M. Fouquet left us still, of whom we have no reason to complain; but, as he is no procureur-general without his gown, we agree with M. de la Fontaine and pronounce the gown to be nothing but a bugbear."

"_Fugiunt risus leporesque_," said Loret.

"The smiles and the graces," said some one present.

"That is not the way," said Pelisson, gravely, "that I translate _lepores_."

"How do you translate it?" said La Fontaine.

"Thus: The hares run away as soon as they see M. Fouquet." A burst of laughter, in which the superintendent joined, followed this sally.

"But why hares?" objected Conrart, vexed.

"Because the hare will be the very one who will not be over pleased to see M. Fouquet surrounded by all the attributes which his parliamentary strength and power confer on him."

"Oh! oh!" murmured the poets.

"_Quo non ascendam_," said Conrart, "seems impossible to me, when one is fortunate enough to wear the gown of the procureur-general."

Transcriber's note: "To what heights may he not aspire?" Fouquet's motto. - JB

"On the contrary, it seems so to me without that gown," said the obstinate Pelisson; "what is your opinion, Gourville?"

"I think the gown in question is a very good thing," replied the latter; "but I equally think that a million and a half is far better than the gown."

"And I am of Gourville's opinion," exclaimed Fouquet, stopping the discussion by the expression of his own opinion, which would necessarily bear down all the others.

"A million and a half," Pelisson grumbled out; "now I happen to know an Indian fable - "

"Tell it to me," said La Fontaine; "I ought to know it too."

"Tell it, tell it," said the others.

"There was a tortoise, which was, as usual, well protected by its shell," said Pelisson; "whenever its enemies threatened it, it took refuge within its covering. One day some one said to it, 'You must feel very hot in such a house as that in the summer, and you are altogether prevented showing off your graces; there is a snake here, who will give you a million and a half for your shell.'"

"Good!" said the superintendent, laughing.

"Well, what next?" said La Fontaine, more interested in the apologue than in the moral.

"The tortoise sold his shell and remained naked and defenseless. A vulture happened to see him, and being hungry, broke the tortoise's back with a blow of his beak and devoured it. The moral is, that M. Fouquet should take very good care to keep his gown."

La Fontaine understood the moral seriously. "You forget Aeschylus," he said, to his adversary.

"What do you mean?"

"Aeschylus was bald-headed, and a vulture - your vulture, probably - who was a great amateur in tortoises, mistook at a distance his head for a block of stone, and let a tortoise, which was shrunk up in his shell, fall upon it."

"Yes, yes, La Fontaine is right," resumed Fouquet, who had become very thoughtful; "whenever a vulture wishes to devour a tortoise, he well knows how to break his shell; but happy is that tortoise a snake pays a million and a half for his envelope. If any one were to bring me a generous-hearted snake like the one in your fable, Pelisson, I would give him my shell."

"_Rara avis in terres!_" cried Conrart.

Transcriber's note: "A creature rare on earth." - JB

"And like a black swan, is he not?" added La Fontaine; "well, then, the bird in question, black and rare, is already found."

"Do you mean to say that you have found a purchaser for my post of procureur-general?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"I have, monsieur."

"But the superintendent never said that he wished to sell," resumed Pelisson.

"I beg your pardon," said Conrart, "you yourself spoke about it, even - "

"Yes, I am a witness to that," said Gourville.

"He seems very tenacious about his brilliant idea," said Fouquet, laughing. "Well, La Fontaine, who is the purchaser?"

"A perfect blackbird, for he is a counselor belonging to the parliament, an excellent fellow."

"What is his name?"

"Vanel."

"Vanel!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Vanel the husband of - "

"Precisely, her husband; yes, monsieur."

"Poor fellow!" said Fouquet, with an expression of great interest.

"He wishes to be everything that you have been, monsieur," said Gourville, "and to do everything that you have done."

"It is very agreeable; tell us all about it, La Fontaine."

"It is very simple. I see him occasionally, and a short time ago I met him, walking about on the Place de la Bastille, at the very moment when I was about to take the small carriage to come down here to Saint-Mande."

"He must have been watching his wife," interrupted Loret.

"Oh, no!" said La Fontaine, "he is far from being jealous. He accosted me, embraced me, and took me to the inn called L'Image Saint-Fiacre, and told me all about his troubles."

"He has his troubles, then?"

"Yes; his wife wants to make him ambitious."

"Well, and he told you - "

"That some one had spoken to him about a post in parliament; that M. Fouquet's name had been mentioned; that ever since, Madame Vanel dreams of nothing else than being called madame la procureur-generale, and that it makes her ill and kills her every night she does not dream about it."

"The deuce!"

"Poor woman!" said Fouquet.

"Wait a moment. Conrart is always telling me that I do not know how to conduct matters of business; you will see how I managed this one."

"Well, go on."

"I suppose you know,' said I to Vanel, 'that the value of a post such as that which M. Fouquet holds is by no means trifling.'

"How much do you imagine it to be?' he said.

"M. Fouquet, I know, has refused seventeen hundred thousand francs.'

"My wife,' replied Vanel, 'had estimated it at about fourteen hundred thousand.'

"Ready money?' I said.

"Yes; she has sold some property of hers in Guienne, and has received the purchase money."

"That's a pretty sum to touch all at once," said the Abbe Fouquet, who had not hitherto said a word.

"Poor Madame Vanel!" murmured Fouquet.

Pelisson shrugged his shoulders, as he whispered in Fouquet's ear, "That woman is a perfect fiend."

"That may be; and it will be delightful to make use of this fiend's money to repair the injury which an angel has done herself for me."

Pelisson looked with a surprised air at Fouquet, whose thoughts were from that moment fixed upon a fresh object in view.

"Well!" inquired La Fontaine, "what about my negotiation?"

"Admirable, my dear poet."

"Yes," said Gourville; "but there are some people who are anxious to have the steed who have not even money enough to pay for the bridle."

"And Vanel would draw back from his offer if he were to be taken at his word," continued the Abbe Fouquet.

"I do not believe it," said La Fontaine.

"What do you know about it?"

"Why, you have not yet heard the denouement of my story."

"If there is a denouement, why do you beat about the bush so much?"

"Semper ad eventum. Is that correct?" said Fouquet, with the air of a nobleman who condescends to barbarisms. To which the Latinists present answered with loud applause.

Transcriber's note: "With always an eye to the climax." - JB

"My denouement," cried La Fontaine, "is that Vanel, that determined blackbird, knowing that I was coming to Saint-Mande, implored me to bring him with me, and, if possible, to present him to M. Fouquet."

"So that - "

"So that he is here; I left him in that part of the ground called Bel-Air. Well, M. Fouquet, what is your reply?"

"Well, it is not respectful towards Madame Vanel that her husband should run the risk of catching cold outside my house; send for him, La Fontaine, since you know where he is."

"I will go myself."

"And I will accompany you," said the Abbe Fouquet; "I will carry the money bags."

"No jesting," said Fouquet, seriously; "let the business be a serious one, if it is to be one at all. But first of all, let us show we are hospitable. Make my apologies, La Fontaine, to M. Vanel, and tell him how distressed I am to have kept him waiting, but that I was not aware he was there."

La Fontaine set off at once, fortunately accompanied by Gourville, for, absorbed in his own calculations, the poet would have mistaken the route, and was hurrying as fast as he could towards the village of Saint-Mande. Within a quarter of an hour afterwards, M. Vanel was introduced into the superintendent's cabinet, a description of which has already been given at the beginning of this story. When Fouquet saw him enter, he called to Pelisson, and whispered a few words in his ear. "Do not lose a single word of what I am going to say: let all the silver and gold plate, together with my jewels of every description, be packed up in the carriage. You will take the black horses: the jeweler will accompany you; and you will postpone the supper until Madame de Belliere's arrival."

"Will it be necessary to inform Madame de Belliere of it?" said Pelisson.

"No; that will be useless; I will do that. So, away with you, my dear friend."

Pelisson set off, not quite clear as to his friend's meaning or intention, but confident, like every true friend, in the judgment of the

man he was blindly obeying. It is that which constitutes the strength of such men; distrust only arises in the minds of inferior natures.

Vanel bowed lowly to the superintendent, and was about to begin a speech.

"Do not trouble yourself, monsieur," said Fouquet, politely; "I am told you wish to purchase a post I hold. How much can you give me for it?"

"It is for you, monseigneur, to fix the amount you require. I know that offers of purchase have already been made to you for it."

"Madame Vanel, I have been told, values it at fourteen hundred thousand livres."

"That is all we have."

"Can you give me the money immediately?"

"I have not the money with me," said Vanel, frightened almost by the unpretending simplicity, amounting to greatness, of the man, for he had expected disputes, difficulties, opposition of every kind.

"When will you be able to bring it?"

"Whenever you please, monseigneur;" for he began to be afraid that Fouquet was trifling with him.

"If it were not for the trouble you would have in returning to Paris, I would say at once; but we will arrange that the payment and the signature shall take place at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Very good," said Vanel, as cold as ice, and feeling quite bewildered.

"Adieu, Monsieur Vanel, present my humblest respects to Madame Vanel," said Fouquet, as he rose; upon which Vanel, who felt the blood rushing to his head, for he was quite confounded by his success, said seriously to the superintendent, "Will you give me your word, monseigneur, upon this affair?"

Fouquet turned round his head, saying, "_Pardieu_, and you, monsieur?"

Vanel hesitated, trembled all over, and at last finished by hesitatingly holding out his hand. Fouquet opened and nobly extended his own; this loyal hand lay for a moment in Vanel's most hypocritical palm, and he pressed it in his own, in order the better to convince himself of the compact. The superintendent gently disengaged his hand, as he again said, "Adieu." And then Vanel ran hastily to the door, hurried along the vestibule, and fled as quickly as he could.