

## Chapter 47

### Madame de Belliere's Plate and Diamonds.

Fouquet had no sooner dismissed Vanel than he began to reflect for a few moments - "A man never can do too much for the woman he has once loved. Marguerite wishes to be the wife of a procureur-general - and why not confer this pleasure upon her? And, now that the most scrupulous and sensitive conscience will be unable to reproach me with anything, let my thoughts be bestowed on her who has shown so much devotion for me. Madame de Belliere ought to be there by this time," he said, as he turned towards the secret door.

After he had locked himself in, he opened the subterranean passage, and rapidly hastened towards the means of communicating between the house at

Vincennes and his own residence. He had neglected to apprise his friend of his approach, by ringing the bell, perfectly assured that she would never fail to be exact at the rendezvous; as, indeed, was the case, for she was already waiting. The noise the superintendent made aroused her; she ran to take from under the door the letter he had thrust there, and which simply said, "Come, marquise; we are waiting supper for you." With her heart filled with happiness Madame de Belliere ran to her carriage in the Avenue de Vincennes, and in a few minutes she was holding out her hand to Gourville, who was standing at the entrance, where, in order the better to please his master, he had stationed himself to watch her arrival. She had not observed that Fouquet's black horse arrived at the

same time, all steaming and foam-flaked, having returned to Saint-Mande with Pelisson and the very jeweler to whom Madame de Belliere had sold her plate and her jewels. Pelisson introduced the goldsmith into the cabinet, which Fouquet had not yet left. The superintendent thanked him for having been good enough to regard as a simple deposit in his hands, the valuable property which he had every right to sell; and he cast his eyes on the total of the account, which amounted to thirteen hundred thousand francs. Then, going for a few moments to his desk, he wrote an order for fourteen hundred thousand francs, payable at sight, at his treasury, before twelve o'clock the next day.

"A hundred thousand francs profit!" cried the goldsmith. "Oh, monseigneur, what generosity!"

"Nay, nay, not so, monsieur," said Fouquet, touching him on the shoulder; "there are certain kindnesses which can never be repaid. This profit is only what you have earned; but the interest of your money still remains to be arranged." And, saying this, he unfastened from his sleeve a diamond button, which the goldsmith himself had often valued at three thousand pistoles. "Take this," he said to the goldsmith, "in remembrance of me. Farewell; you are an honest man."

"And you, monseigneur," cried the goldsmith, completely overcome, "are the noblest man that ever lived."

Fouquet let the worthy goldsmith pass out of the room by a secret door,

and then went to receive Madame de Belliere, who was already surrounded by all the guests. The marquise was always beautiful, but now her loveliness was more dazzling than ever. "Do you not think, gentlemen," said Fouquet, "that madame is more than usually beautiful this evening? And do you happen to know why?"

"Because madame is really the most beautiful of all women," said some one present.

"No; but because she is the best. And yet - "

"Yet?" said the marquise, smiling.

"And yet, all the jewels which madame is wearing this evening are nothing but false stones." At this remark the marquise blushed most painfully.

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed all the guests, "that can very well be said of one who has the finest diamonds in Paris."

"Well?" said Fouquet to Pelisson, in a low tone.

"Well, at last I have understood you," returned the latter; "and you have done exceedingly well."

"Supper is ready, monseigneur," said Vatel, with majestic air and tone.

The crowd of guests hurried, more quickly than is usually the case with ministerial entertainments, towards the banqueting-room, where a magnificent spectacle presented itself. Upon the buffets, upon the side-tables, upon the supper-table itself, in the midst of flowers and light, glittered most dazzlingly the richest and most costly gold and silver plate that could possibly be seen - relics of those ancient magnificent productions the Florentine artists, whom the Medici family patronized, sculptured, chased, and moulded for the purpose of holding flowers, at a time when gold existed still in France. These hidden marvels, which had been buried during the civil wars, timidly reappeared during the intervals of that war of good taste called La Fronde; at a time when noblemen fighting against nobleman killed, but did not pillage each other. All the plate present had Madame de Belliere's arms engraved upon it. "Look," cried La Fontaine, "here is a P and a B."

But the most remarkable object present was the cover which Fouquet had assigned to the marquise. Near her was a pyramid of diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, antique cameos, sardonyx stones, carved by the old Greeks of Asia Minor, with mountings of Mysian gold; curious mosaics of ancient Alexandria, set in silver; massive Egyptian bracelets lay heaped on a large plate of Palissy ware, supported by a tripod of gilt bronze, sculptured by Benvenuto Cellini. The marquise turned pale, as she recognized what she had never expected to see again. A profound silence fell on every one of the restless and excited guests. Fouquet did not even make a sign in dismissal of the richly liveried servants who crowded like bees round the huge buffets and other tables in the room.

"Gentlemen," he said, "all this plate which you behold once belonged to Madame de Belliere, who, having observed one of her friends in great distress, sent all this gold and silver, together with the heap of jewels now before her, to her goldsmith. This noble conduct of a devoted friend can well be understood by such friends as you. Happy indeed is that man who sees himself loved in such a manner. Let us drink to the health of Madame de Belliere."

A tremendous burst of applause followed his words, and made poor Madame de Belliere sink back dumb and breathless in her seat. "And then," added Pelisson, who was always affected by a noble action, as he was invariably impressed by beauty, "let us also drink to the health of him who inspired madame's noble conduct; for such a man is worthy of being worthily loved."

It was now the marquise's turn. She rose, pale and smiling; and as she held out her glass with a faltering hand, and her trembling fingers touched those of Fouquet, her look, full of love, found its mirror in that of her ardent and generous-hearted lover. Begun in this manner, the supper soon became a *fete*; no one tried to be witty, but no one failed in being so. La Fontaine forgot his Gorgny wine, and allowed Vatel to reconcile him to the wines of the Rhone, and those from the shores of Spain. The Abbe Fouquet became so kind and good-natured, that Gourville said to him, "Take care, monsieur l'abbe; if you are so tender, you will be carved and eaten."

The hours passed away so joyously, that, contrary to his usual custom,

the superintendent did not leave the table before the end of the dessert. He smiled upon his friends, delighted as a man is whose heart becomes intoxicated before his head - and, for the first time, looked at the clock. Suddenly a carriage rolled into the courtyard, and, strange to say, it was heard high above the noise of the mirth which prevailed. Fouquet listened attentively, and then turned his eyes towards the ante-chamber. It seemed as if he could hear a step passing across it, a step that, instead of pressing the ground, weighed heavily upon his heart. "M. d'Herblay, bishop of Vannes," the usher announced. And Aramis's grave and thoughtful face appeared upon the threshold of the door, between the remains of two garlands, of which the flame of a lamp had just burnt the thread that once united them.