

Chapter 27

Madame de Belliere's Plate.

The blow had been the more painful on account of its being unexpected. It was some time before the marquise recovered herself; but once recovered, she began to reflect upon the events so heartlessly announced to her. She therefore returned, at the risk even of losing her life in the way, to that train of ideas which her relentless friend had forced her to pursue. Treason, then - deep menaces, concealed under the semblance of public interest - such were Colbert's maneuvers. A detestable delight at an approaching downfall, untiring efforts to attain this object, means of seduction no less wicked than the crime itself - such were the weapons Marguerite employed. The crooked atoms of Descartes triumphed; to the man without compassion was united a woman without heart. The marquise perceived, with sorrow rather than indignation, that the king was an accomplice in the plot which betrayed the duplicity of Louis XIII. in his advanced age, and the avarice of Mazarin at a period of life when he had not had the opportunity of gorging himself with French gold. The spirit of this courageous woman soon resumed its energy, no longer overwhelmed by indulgence in compassionate lamentations. The marquise was not one to weep when action was necessary, nor to waste time in bewailing a misfortune as long as means still existed of relieving it. For some minutes she buried her face in her cold fingers, and then, raising her head, rang for her attendants with a steady hand, and with a gesture betraying a fixed

determination of purpose. Her resolution was taken.

"Is everything prepared for my departure?" she inquired of one of her female attendants who entered.

"Yes, madame; but it was not expected that your ladyship would leave for Belliere for the next few days."

"All my jewels and articles of value, then, are packed up?"

"Yes, madame; but hitherto we have been in the habit of leaving them in Paris. Your ladyship does not generally take your jewels with you into the country."

"But they are all in order, you say?"

"Yes, in your ladyship's own room."

"The gold plate?"

"In the chest."

"And the silver plate?"

"In the great oak closet."

The marquise remained silent for a few moments, and then said calmly, "Let my goldsmith be sent for."

Her attendants quitted the room to execute the order. The marquise, however, had entered her own room, and was inspecting her casket of jewels with the greatest attention. Never, until now, had she bestowed such close attention upon riches in which women take so much pride; never, until now, had she looked at her jewels, except for the purpose of making a selection according to their settings or their colors. On this occasion, however, she admired the size of the rubies and the brilliancy of the diamonds; she grieved over every blemish and every defect; she thought the gold light, and the stones wretched. The goldsmith, as he entered, found her thus occupied. "M. Fauchaux," she said, "I believe you supplied me with my gold service?"

"I did, your ladyship."

"I do not now remember the amount of the account."

"Of the new service, madame, or of that which M. de Belliere presented to you on your marriage? for I have furnished both."

"First of all, the new one."

"The covers, the goblets, and the dishes, with their covers, the _eau-epergne_, the ice-pails, the dishes for the preserves, and the tea and

coffee urns, cost your ladyship sixty thousand francs."

"No more?"

"Your ladyship thought the account very high."

"Yes, yes; I remember, in fact, that it was dear; but it was the workmanship, I suppose?"

"Yes, madame; the designs, the chasings - all new patterns."

"What proportion of the cost does the workmanship form? Do not hesitate to tell me."

"A third of its value, madame."

"There is the other service, the old one, that which belonged to my husband?"

"Yes, madame; there is less workmanship in that than in the other. Its intrinsic value does not exceed thirty thousand francs."

"Thirty thousand," murmured the marquise. "But, M. Faucheux, there is also the service which belonged to my mother; all that massive plate which I did not wish to part with, on account of the associations connected with it."

"Ah! madame, that would indeed be an excellent resource for those who, unlike your ladyship, might not be in position to keep their plate. In chasing that they worked in solid metal. But that service is no longer in fashion. Its weight is its only advantage."

"That is all I care about. How much does it weigh?"

"Fifty thousand livres at the very least. I do not allude to the enormous vases for the buffet, which alone weigh five thousand livres, or ten thousand the pair."

"One hundred and thirty," murmured the marquise. "You are quite sure of your figures, M. Faucheux?"

"The amount is entered in my books. Your ladyship is extremely methodical, I am aware."

"Let us now turn to another subject," said Madame de Belliere; and she opened one of her jewel-boxes.

"I recognize these emeralds," said M. Faucheux; "for it was I who had the setting of them. They are the most beautiful in the whole court. No, I am mistaken; Madame de Chatillon has the most beautiful set; she had them from Messieurs de Guise; but your set, madame, comes next."

"What are they worth?"

"Mounted?"

"No; supposing I wished to sell them."

"I know very well who would buy them," exclaimed M. Fauchoux.

"That is the very thing I ask. They could be sold, then?"

"All your jewels could be sold, madame. It is well known that you possess the most beautiful jewels in Paris. You are not changeable in your tastes; when you make a purchase it is of the very best; and what you purchase you do not part with."

"What could these emeralds be sold for, then?"

"A hundred and thirty thousand francs."

The marquise wrote down upon her tablets the amount which the jeweler mentioned. "The ruby necklace?" she said.

"Are they balas-rubies, madame?"

"Here they are."

"They are beautiful - magnificent. I did not know your ladyship had these stones."

"What is their value?"

"Two hundred thousand francs. The center one is alone worth a hundred thousand."

"I thought so," said the marquise. "As for diamonds, I have them in numbers; rings, necklaces, sprigs, ear-rings, clasps. Tell me their value, M. Faucheux."

The jeweler took his magnifying-glass and scales, weighed and inspected them, and silently made his calculations. "These stones," he said, "must have cost your ladyship an income of forty thousand francs."

"You value them at eight hundred thousand francs?"

"Nearly so."

"It is about what I imagined - but the settings are not included?"

"No, madame; but if I were called upon to sell or to buy, I should be satisfied with the gold of the settings alone as my profit upon the transaction. I should make a good twenty-five thousand francs."

"An agreeable sum."

"Very much so, madame."

"Will you then accept that profit, then, on condition of converting the jewels into money?"

"But you do not intend to sell you diamonds, I suppose, madame?"
exclaimed the bewildered jeweler.

"Silence, M. Fauchaux, do not disturb yourself about that; give me an answer simply. You are an honorable man, with whom my family has dealt for thirty years; you knew my father and mother, whom your own father and mother served. I address you as a friend; will you accept the gold of the settings in return for a sum of ready money to be placed in my hands?"

"Eight hundred thousand francs! it is enormous."

"I know it."

"Impossible to find."

"Not so."

"But reflect, madame, upon the effect which will be produced by the sale

of your jewels."

"No one need know it. You can get sets of false jewels made for me, similar to the real. Do not answer a word; I insist upon it. Sell them separately, sell the stones only."

"In that way it is easy. Monsieur is looking out for some sets of jewels as well as single stones for Madame's toilette. There will be a competition for them. I can easily dispose of six hundred thousand francs' worth to Monsieur. I am certain yours are the most beautiful."

"When can you do so?"

"In less than three days' time."

"Very well, the remainder you will dispose of among private individuals. For the present, make me out a contract of sale, payment to be made in four days."

"I entreat you to reflect, madame; for if you force the sale, you will lose a hundred thousand francs."

"If necessary, I will lose two hundred; I wish everything to be settled this evening. Do you accept?"

"I do, your ladyship. I will not conceal from you that I shall make

fifty thousand francs by the transaction."

"So much the better for you. In what way shall I have the money?"

"Either in gold, or in bills of the bank of Lyons, payable at M. Colbert's."

"I agree," said the marquise, eagerly; "return home and bring the sum in question in notes, as soon as possible."

"Yes, madame, but for Heaven's sake - "

"Not a word, M. Fauchaux. By the by, I was forgetting the silver plate. What is the value of that which I have?"

"Fifty thousand francs, madame."

"That makes a million," said the marquise to herself. "M. Fauchaux, you will take away with you both the gold and silver plate. I can assign, as a pretext, that I wish it remodeled on patters more in accordance with my own taste. Melt it down, and return me its value in money, at once."

"It shall be done, your ladyship."

"You will be good enough to place the money in a chest, and direct one of your clerks to accompany the chest, and without my servants seeing him;

and order him to wait for me in a carriage."

"In Madame de Faucheux's carriage?" said the jeweler.

"If you will allow it, and I will call for it at your house."

"Certainly, your ladyship."

"I will direct some of my servants to convey the plate to your house."

The marquise rung. "Let the small van be placed at M. Faucheux's disposal," she said. The jeweler bowed and left the house, directing that the van should follow him closely, saying aloud, that the marquise was about to have her plate melted down in order to have other plate manufactured of a more modern style. Three hours afterwards she went to M. Faucheux's house and received from him eight hundred francs in gold inclosed in a chest, which one of the clerks could hardly carry towards Madame Faucheux's carriage - for Madame Faucheux kept her carriage. As the daughter of a president of accounts, she had brought a marriage portion of thirty thousand crowns to her husband, who was syndic of the goldsmiths. These thirty thousand crowns had become very fruitful during twenty years. The jeweler, though a millionaire, was a modest man. He had purchased a substantial carriage, built in 1648, ten years after the king's birth. This carriage, or rather house upon wheels, excited the admiration of the whole quarter in which he resided - it was covered with allegorical paintings, and clouds scattered over with stars. The marquise entered this somewhat extraordinary vehicle, sitting opposite

the clerk, who endeavored to put his knees out of the way, afraid even of touching the marquise's dress. It was the clerk, too, who told the coachman, who was very proud of having a marquise to drive, to take the road to Saint-Mande.