

Chapter V. In which Something will be said of Cropoli--of Cropoli and of a Great Unknown Painter.

Whilst the Comte de la Fere with Raoul visits the new buildings he has erected, and the new horses he has bought, with the reader's permission we will lead him back to the city of Blois, and make him a witness of the unaccustomed activity which pervades that city.

It was in the hotels that the surprise of the news brought by Raoul was most sensibly felt.

In fact, the king and the court at Blois, that is to say, a hundred horsemen, ten carriages, two hundred horses, as many lackeys as masters--where was this crowd to be housed? Where were to be lodged all the gentry of the neighborhood, who would gather in two or three hours after the news had enlarged the circle of its report, like the increasing circumferences produced by a stone thrown into a placid lake?

Blois, as peaceful in the morning, as we have seen, as the calmest lake in the world, at the announcement of the royal arrival, was suddenly filled with the tumult and buzzing of a swarm of bees.

All the servants of the castle, under the inspection of the officers, were sent into the city in quest of provisions, and ten horsemen were dispatched to the preserves of Chambord to seek for game, to the fisheries of Beuvron for fish, and to the gardens of Cheverny for fruits and flowers.

Precious tapestries, and lustres with great gilt chains, were drawn from the cupboards; an army of the poor were engaged in sweeping the courts and washing the stone fronts, whilst their wives went in droves to the meadows beyond the Loire, to gather green boughs and field-flowers. The whole city, not to be behind in this luxury of cleanliness, assumed its best toilette with the help of brushes, brooms, and water. The gutters of the upper town, swollen by these continued ablutions, became rivers at the bottom of the city, and the pavement, generally very muddy, it must be allowed, took a clean face, and absolutely shone in the friendly rays of the sun.

Next the music was to be provided; drawers were emptied; the shop-keepers did a glorious trade in wax, ribbons, and sword-knots; housekeepers laid in stores of bread, meat, and spices. Already numbers of the citizens whose houses were furnished as if for a siege, having nothing more to do, donned their festive clothes, and directed their course towards the city gate, in order to be the first to signal or see the cortege. They knew very well that the king would not arrive before night, perhaps not before the next morning. Yet what is expectation but

a kind of folly, and what is that folly but an excess of hope?

In the lower city, at scarcely a hundred paces from the Castle of the States, between the mall and the castle, in a sufficiently handsome street, then called the Rue Vieille, and which must, in fact, have been very old, stood a venerable edifice, with pointed gables, of squat but large dimensions, ornamented with three windows looking into the street on the first floor, with two in the second, and with a little oeil de boeuf in the third.

On the sides of this triangle had recently been constructed a parallelogram of considerable size, which encroached upon the street remorselessly, according to the familiar uses of the building of that period. The street was narrowed by a quarter by it, but then the house was enlarged by a half; and was not that a sufficient compensation?

Tradition said that this house with the pointed gables was inhabited, in the time of Henry III., by a councilor of state whom Queen Catherine came, some say to visit, and others to strangle. However that may be, the good lady must have stepped with a circumspect foot over the threshold of this building.

After the councilor had died--whether by strangulation or naturally is of no consequence--the house had been sold, then abandoned, and lastly isolated from the other houses of the street. Towards the middle of the reign of Louis XIII. only, an Italian named Cropoli, escaped from the kitchens of the Marechal d'Ancre, came and took possession of this house. There he established a little hostelry, in which was fabricated a macaroni so delicious that people came from miles round to fetch it or eat it.

So famous had the house become for it, that when Mary de Medici was a prisoner, as we know, in the castle of Blois, she once sent for some.

It was precisely on the day she had escaped by the famous window. The dish of macaroni was left upon the table, only just tasted by the royal mouth.

This double favor, of a strangulation and a macaroni, conferred upon the triangular house, gave poor Cropoli a fancy to grace his hostelry with a pompous title. But his quality of an Italian was no recommendation in these times, and his small, well-concealed fortune forbade attracting too much attention.

When he found himself about to die, which happened in 1643, just after the death of Louis XIII., he called to him his son, a young cook of great promise, and with tears in his eyes, he recommended him to preserve carefully the secret of the macaroni, to Frenchify his name, and at length, when the political horizon should be cleared from the

clouds which obscured it--this was practiced then as in our day, to order of the nearest smith a handsome sign, upon which a famous painter, whom he named, should design two queens' portraits, with these words as a legend: "TO THE MEDICI."

The worthy Cropoli, after these recommendations, had only sufficient time to point out to his young successor a chimney, under the slab of which he had hidden a thousand ten-franc pieces, and then expired.

Cropoli the younger, like a man of good heart, supported the loss with resignation, and the gain without insolence. He began by accustoming the public to sound the final i of his name so little, that by the aid of general complaisance, he was soon called nothing but M. Cropole, which is quite a French name. He then married, having had in his eye a little French girl, from whose parents he extorted a reasonable dowry by showing them what there was beneath the slab of the chimney.

These two points accomplished, he went in search of the painter who was to paint the sign; and he was soon found. He was an old Italian, a rival of the Raphaels and the Caracci, but an unfortunate rival. He said he was of the Venetian school, doubtless from his fondness for color. His works, of which he had never sold one, attracted the eye at a distance of a hundred paces; but they so formidably displeased the citizens, that he had finished by painting no more.

He boasted of having painted a bath-room for Madame la Marechale d'Ancre, and mourned over this chamber having been burnt at the time of the marechal's disaster.

Cropoli, in his character of a compatriot, was indulgent towards Pittrino, which was the name of the artist. Perhaps he had seen the famous pictures of the bath-room. Be this as it may, he held in such esteem, we may say in such friendship, the famous Pittrino, that he took him in his own house.

Pittrino, grateful, and fed with macaroni, set about propagating the reputation of this national dish, and from the time of its founder, he had rendered, with his indefatigable tongue, signal services to the house of Cropoli.

As he grew old he attached himself to the son as he had done to the father, and by degrees became a kind of over-looker of a house in which his remarkable integrity, his acknowledged sobriety, and a thousand other virtues useless to enumerate, gave him an eternal place by the fireside, with a right of inspection over the domestics. Besides this, it was he who tasted the macaroni, to maintain the pure flavor of the ancient tradition; and it must be allowed that he never permitted a grain of pepper too much, or an atom of parmesan too little. His joy was at its height on that day when called upon to share the secret of

Cropoli the younger, and to paint the famous sign.

He was seen at once rummaging with ardor in an old box, in which he found some brushes, a little gnawed by the rats, but still passable; some linseed-oil in a bottle, and a palette which had formerly belonged to Bronzino, that dieu de la pittoure, as the ultramontane artist, in his ever young enthusiasm, always called him.

Pittrino was puffed up with all the joy of a rehabilitation.

He did as Raphael had done--he changed his style, and painted, in the fashion of Albani, two goddesses rather than two queens. These illustrious ladies appeared so lovely on the sign,--they presented to the astonished eyes such an assemblage of lilies and roses, the enchanting result of the changes of style in Pittrino--they assumed the poses of sirens so Anacreontically--that the principal echevin, when admitted to view this capital piece in the salle of Cropole, at once declared that these ladies were too handsome, of too animated a beauty, to figure as a sign in the eyes of passers-by.

To Pittrino he added, "His royal highness, Monsieur, who often comes into our city, will not be much pleased to see his illustrious mother so slightly clothed, and he will send you to the oubliettes of the state; for, remember, the heart of that glorious prince is not always tender. You must efface either the two sirens or the legend, without which I forbid the exhibition of the sign. I say this for your sake, Master Cropole, as well for yours, Signor Pittrino."

What answer could be made to this? It was necessary to thank the echevin for his kindness, which Cropole did. But Pittrino remained downcast and said he felt assured of what was about to happen.

The visitor was scarcely gone when Cropole, crossing his arms, said: "Well, master, what is to be done?"

"We must efface the legend," said Pittrino, in a melancholy tone. "I have some excellent ivory-black; it will be done in a moment, and we will replace the Medici by the nymphs or the sirens, whichever you prefer."

"No," said Cropole, "the will of my father must be carried out. My father considered--"

"He considered the figures of the most importance," said Pittrino.

"He thought most of the legend," said Cropole.

"The proof of the importance in which he held the figures," said Pittrino, "is that he desired they should be likenesses, and they are

so."

"Yes; but if they had not been so, who would have recognized them without the legend? At the present day even, when the memory of the Blaisois begins to be faint with regard to these two celebrated persons, who would recognize Catherine and Mary without the words 'To the Medici'?"

"But the figures?" said Pittrino, in despair; for he felt that young Cropole was right. "I should not like to lose the fruit of my labor."

"And I should not wish you to be thrown into prison, and myself into the oubliettes."

"Let us efface 'Medici'," said Pittrino, supplicatingly.

"No," replied Cropole, firmly. "I have got an idea, a sublime idea--your picture shall appear, and my legend likewise. Does not 'Medici' mean doctor, or physician, in Italian?"

"Yes, in the plural."

"Well, then, you shall order another sign--frame of the smith; you shall paint six physicians, and write underneath 'Aux Medici' which makes a very pretty play upon words."

"Six physicians! impossible! And the composition?" cried Pittrino.

"That is your business--but so it shall be--I insist upon it--it must be so--my macaroni is burning."

This reasoning was peremptory--Pittrino obeyed. He composed the sign of six physicians, with the legend; the echevin applauded and authorized it.

The sign produced an extravagant success in the city, which proves that poetry has always been in the wrong, before citizens, as Pittrino said.

Cropole, to make amends to his painter-in-ordinary, hung up the nymphs of the preceding sign in his bedroom, which made Madame Cropole blush every time she looked at it, when she was undressing at night.

This is the way in which the pointed-gable house got a sign; and this is how the hostelry of the Medici, making a fortune, was found to be enlarged by a quarter, as we have described. And this is how there was at Blois a hostelry of that name, and had for a painter-in-ordinary Master Pittrino.

