

Chapter VI. The Unknown.

Thus founded and recommended by its sign, the hostelry of Master Cropole held its way steadily on towards a solid prosperity.

It was not an immense fortune that Cropole had in perspective; but he might hope to double the thousand louis d'or left by his father, to make another thousand louis by the sale of his house and stock, and at length to live happily like a retired citizen.

Cropole was anxious for gain, and was half-crazy with joy at the news of the arrival of Louis XIV.

Himself, his wife, Pittrino, and two cooks, immediately laid hands upon all the inhabitants of the dove-cote, the poultry-yard, and the rabbit-hutches; so that as many lamentations and cries resounded in the yards of the hostelry of the Medici as were formerly heard in Rama.

Cropole had, at the time, but one single traveler in his house.

This was a man of scarcely thirty years of age, handsome, tall, austere, or rather melancholy, in all his gestures and looks.

He was dressed in black velvet with jet trimmings; a white collar, as plain as that of the severest Puritan, set off the whiteness of his youthful neck; a small dark-colored mustache scarcely covered his curled, disdainful lip.

He spoke to people looking them full in the face, without affectation, it is true, but without scruple; so that the brilliancy of his black eyes became so insupportable, that more than one look had sunk beneath his, like the weaker sword in a single combat.

At this time, in which men, all created equal by God, were divided, thanks to prejudices, into two distinct castes, the gentlemen and the commoner, as they are really divided into two races, the black and the white,--at this time, we say, he whose portrait we have just sketched could not fail of being taken for a gentleman, and of the best class. To ascertain this, there was no necessity to consult anything but his hands, long, slender, and white, of which every muscle, every vein, became apparent through the skin at the least movement, and eloquently spoke of good descent.

This gentleman, then, had arrived alone at Cropole's house. He had taken, without hesitation, without reflection even, the principal apartment which the hotelier had pointed out to him with a rapacious aim, very praiseworthy, some will say, very reprehensible will say

others, if they admit that Cropole was a physiognomist, and judged people at first sight.

This apartment was that which composed the whole front of the ancient triangular house; a large salon, lighted by two windows on the first stage, a small chamber by the side of it, and another above it.

Now, from the time he had arrived, this gentleman had scarcely touched any repast that had been served up to him in his chamber. He had spoken but two words to the host, to warn him that a traveler of the name of Parry would arrive, and to desire that, when he did, he should be shown up to him immediately.

He afterwards preserved so profound a silence, that Cropole was almost offended, so much did he prefer people who were good company.

This gentleman had risen early the morning of the day on which this history begins, and had placed himself at the window of his salon, seated upon the ledge, and leaning upon the rail of the balcony, gazing sadly but persistently on both sides of the street, watching, no doubt, for the arrival of the traveler he had mentioned to the host.

In this way he had seen the little cortege of Monsieur return from hunting, then had again partaken of the profound tranquillity of the street, absorbed in his own expectations.

All at once the movement of the crowd going to the meadows, couriers setting out, washers of pavement, purveyors of the royal household, gabbling, scampering shop-boys, chariots in motion, hair-dressers on the run, and pages toiling along, this tumult and bustle had surprised him, but without losing any of that impassible and supreme majesty which gives to the eagle and the lion that serene and contemptuous glance amidst the hurrahs and shouts of hunters or the curious.

Soon the cries of the victims slaughtered in the poultry-yard, the hasty steps of Madame Cropole up that little wooden staircase, so narrow and so echoing; the bounding pace of Pittrino, who only that morning was smoking at the door with all the phlegm of a Dutchman; all this communicated something like surprise and agitation to the traveler.

As he was rising to make inquiries, the door of his chamber opened. The unknown concluded they were about to introduce the impatiently expected traveler, and made three precipitate steps to meet him.

But, instead of the person he expected, it was Master Cropole who appeared, and behind him, in the half-dark staircase, the pleasant face of Madame Cropole, rendered trivial by curiosity. She only gave one furtive glance at the handsome gentleman, and disappeared.

Cropole advanced, cap in hand, rather bent than bowing.

A gesture of the unknown interrogated him, without a word being pronounced.

"Monsieur," said Cropole, "I come to ask how--what ought I to say: your lordship, monsieur le comte, or monsieur le marquis?"

"Say monsieur, and speak quickly," replied the unknown, with that haughty accent which admits of neither discussion nor reply.

"I came, then, to inquire how monsieur had passed the night, and if monsieur intended to keep this apartment?"

"Yes."

"Monsieur, something has happened upon which we could not reckon."

"What?"

"His majesty Louis XIV. will enter our city to-day, and will remain here one day, perhaps two."

Great astonishment was painted on the countenance of the unknown.

"The King of France is coming to Blois?"

"He is on the road, monsieur."

"Then there is the stronger reason for my remaining," said the unknown.

"Very well; but will monsieur keep all the apartments?"

"I do not understand you. Why should I require less to-day than yesterday?"

"Because, monsieur, your lordship will permit me to say, yesterday I did not think proper, when you chose your lodging, to fix any price that might have made your lordship believe that I prejudged your resources; whilst to-day--"

The unknown colored; the idea at once struck him that he was supposed to be poor, and was being insulted.

"Whilst to-day," replied he, coldly, "you do not prejudge."

"Monsieur, I am a well-meaning man, thank God! and simple hotelier as I am, there is in me the blood of a gentleman. My father was a servant and officer of the late Marechal d'Ancre. God rest his soul!"

"I do not contest that point with you; I only wish to know, and that quickly, to what your questions tend?"

"You are too reasonable, monsieur, not to comprehend that our city is small, that the court is about to invade it, that the houses will be overflowing with inhabitants, and that lodgings will consequently obtain considerable prices."

Again the unknown colored. "Name your terms," said he.

"I name them with scruple, monsieur, because I seek an honest gain, and that I wish to carry on my business without being uncivil or extravagant in my demands. Now the room you occupy is considerable, and you are alone."

"That is my business."

"Oh! certainly. I do not mean to turn monsieur out."

The blood rushed to the temples of the unknown; he darted at poor Cropole, the descendant of one of the officers of the Marechal d'Ancre, a glance that would have crushed him down to beneath that famous chimney-slab, if Cropole had not been nailed to the spot by the question of his own proper interests.

"Do you desire me to go?" said he. "Explain yourself--but quickly."

"Monsieur, monsieur, you do not understand me. It is very critical--I know--that which I am doing. I express myself badly, or perhaps, as monsieur is a foreigner, which I perceive by his accent--"

In fact, the unknown spoke with that impetuosity which is the principal character of English accentuation, even among men who speak the French language with the greatest purity.

"As monsieur is a foreigner, I say, it is perhaps he who does not catch my exact meaning. I wish for monsieur to give up one or two of the apartments he occupies, which would diminish his expenses and ease my conscience. Indeed, it is hard to increase unreasonably the price of the chambers, when one has had the honor to let them at a reasonable price."

"How much does the hire amount to since yesterday?"

"Monsieur, to one louis, with refreshments and the charge for the horse."

"Very well; and that of to-day?"

"Ah! there is the difficulty. This is the day of the king's arrival; if the court comes to sleep here, the charge of the day is reckoned. From that it results that three chambers, at two louis each, make six louis. Two louis, monsieur, are not much; but six louis make a great deal."

The unknown, from red, as we have seen him, became very pale.

He drew from his pocket, with heroic bravery, a purse embroidered with a coat-of-arms, which he carefully concealed in the hollow of his hand. This purse was of a thinness, a flabbiness, a hollowness, which did not escape the eye of Cropole.

The unknown emptied the purse into his hand. It contained three double louis, which amounted to the six louis demanded by the host.

But it was seven that Cropole had required.

He looked, therefore, at the unknown, as much as to say, "And then?"

"There remains one louis, does there not, master hotelier?"

"Yes, monsieur, but--"

The unknown plunged his hand into the pocket of his haut-de-chausses, and emptied it. It contained a small pocket-book, a gold key, and some silver. With this change, he made up a louis.

"Thank you, monsieur," said Cropole. "It now only remains for me to ask whether monsieur intends to occupy his apartments to-morrow, in which case I will reserve them for him; whereas, if monsieur does not mean to do so, I will promise them to some of the king's people who are coming."

"That is but right," said the unknown, after a long silence; "but as I have no more money, as you have seen, and as I yet must retain the apartments, you must either sell this diamond in the city, or hold it in pledge."

Cropole looked at the diamond so long, that the unknown said, hastily:

"I prefer your selling it, monsieur; for it is worth three hundred pistoles. A Jew--are there any Jews in Blois?--would give you two hundred or a hundred and fifty for it--take whatever may be offered for it, if it be no more than the price of your lodging. Begone!"

"Oh! monsieur," replied Cropole, ashamed of the sudden inferiority which the unknown reflected upon him by this noble and disinterested confidence, as well as by the unalterable patience opposed to so many suspicions and evasions. "Oh, monsieur, I hope people are not so dishonest at Blois as you seem to think; and that the diamond, being

worth what you say--"

The unknown here again darted at Cropole one of his withering glances.

"I really do not understand diamonds, monsieur, I assure you," cried he.

"But the jewelers do: ask them," said the unknown. "Now I believe our accounts are settled, are they not, monsieur l'hote?"

"Yes, monsieur, and to my profound regret; for I fear I have offended monsieur."

"Not at all!" replied the unknown, with ineffable majesty.

"Or have appeared to be extortionate with a noble traveler. Consider, monsieur, the peculiarity of the case."

"Say no more about it, I desire; and leave me to myself."

Cropole bowed profoundly, and left the room with a stupefied air, which announced that he had a good heart, and felt genuine remorse.

The unknown himself shut the door after him, and, when left alone, looked mournfully at the bottom of the purse, from which he had taken a small silken bag containing the diamond, his last resource.

He dwelt likewise upon the emptiness of his pockets, turned over the papers in his pocket-book, and convinced himself of the state of absolute destitution in which he was about to be plunged.

He raised his eyes towards heaven, with a sublime emotion of despairing calmness, brushed off with his hand some drops of sweat which trickled over his noble brow, and then cast down upon the earth a look which just before had been impressed with almost divine majesty.

That the storm had passed far from him, perhaps he had prayed in the bottom of his soul.

He drew near to the window, resumed his place in the balcony, and remained there, motionless, annihilated, dead, till the moment when, the heavens beginning to darken, the first flambeaux traversed the enlivened street, and gave the signal for illumination to all the windows of the city.