

Chapter LIV. The Houses of M. Fouquet.

Whilst D'Artagnan was returning to Planchet's house, his head aching and bewildered with all that had happened to him, there was passing a scene of quite a different character, and which, nevertheless, is not foreign to the conversation our musketeer had just had with the king; only this scene took place out of Paris, in a house possessed by the superintendent Fouquet in the village of Saint-Mande. The minister had just arrived at this country-house, followed by his principal clerk, who carried an enormous portfolio full of papers to be examined, and others waiting for signature. As it might be about five o'clock in the afternoon, the masters had dined: supper was being prepared for twenty subaltern guests. The superintendent did not stop: on alighting from his carriage, he, at the same bound, sprang through the doorway, traversed the apartments and gained his cabinet, where he declared he would shut himself up to work, commanding that he should not be disturbed for anything but an order from the king. As soon as this order was given, Fouquet shut himself up, and two footmen were placed as sentinels at his door. Then Fouquet pushed a bolt which displaced a panel that walled up the entrance, and prevented everything that passed in this apartment from being either seen or heard. But, against all probability, it was only for the sake of shutting himself up that Fouquet shut himself up thus, for he went straight to a bureau, seated himself at it, opened the portfolio, and began to make a choice amongst the enormous mass of papers it contained. It was not more than ten minutes after he had entered, and taken all the precautions we have described, when the repeated noise of several slight equal knocks struck his ear, and appeared to fix his utmost attention. Fouquet raised his head, turned his ear, and listened.

The strokes continued. Then the worker arose with a slight movement of impatience and walked straight up to a glass behind which the blows were struck by a hand, or by some invisible mechanism. It was a large glass let into a panel. Three other glasses, exactly similar to it, completed the symmetry of the apartment. Nothing distinguished that one from the others. Without doubt, these reiterated knocks were a signal; for, at the moment Fouquet approached the glass listening, the same noise was renewed, and in the same measure. "Oh! oh!" murmured the intendant, with surprise, "who is yonder? I did not expect anybody to-day." And without doubt, to respond to the signal, he pulled out a gilded nail near the glass, and shook it thrice. Then returning to his place, and seating himself again, "Ma foi! let them wait," said he. And plunging again into the ocean of papers unrolled before him, he appeared to think of nothing now but work. In fact, with incredible rapidity and marvelous lucidity, Fouquet deciphered the largest papers and most complicated writings, correcting them, annotating them with a pen moved as if by a fever, and the work melting under his hands, signatures, figures,

references, became multiplied as if ten clerks--that is to say, a hundred fingers and ten brains had performed the duties, instead of the five fingers and single brain of this man. From time to time, only, Fouquet, absorbed by his work, raised his head to cast a furtive glance upon a clock placed before him. The reason of this was, Fouquet set himself a task, and when this task was once set, in one hour's work he, by himself, did what another would not have accomplished in a day; always certain, consequently, provided he was not disturbed, of arriving at the close in the time his devouring activity had fixed. But in the midst of his ardent labor, the soft strokes upon the little bell placed behind the glass sounded again, hasty, and, consequently, more urgent.

"The lady appears to be impatient," said Fouquet. "Humph! a calm! That must be the comtesse; but, no, the comtesse is gone to Rambouillet for three days. The presidente, then? Oh! no, the presidente would not assume such grand airs; she would ring very humbly, then she would wait my good pleasure. The greatest certainty is, that I do not know who it can be, but that I know who it cannot be. And since it is not you, marquise, since it cannot be you, deuce take the rest!" And he went on with his work in spite of the reiterated appeals of the bell. At the end of a quarter of an hour, however, impatience prevailed over Fouquet in his turn: he might be said to consume, rather than to complete the rest of his work; he thrust his papers into his portfolio, and giving a glance at the mirror, whilst the taps continued faster than ever: "Oh! oh!" said he, "whence comes all this racket? What has happened, and who can the Ariadne be who expects me so impatiently. Let us see!"

He then applied the tip of his finger to the nail parallel to the one he had drawn. Immediately the glass moved like a folding-door and discovered a secret closet, rather deep, into which the superintendent disappeared as if going into a vast box. When there, he touched another spring, which opened, not a board, but a block of the wall, and he went out by that opening, leaving the door to shut of itself. Then Fouquet descended about a score of steps which sank, winding, underground, and came to a long, subterranean passage, lighted by imperceptible loopholes. The walls of this vault were covered with slabs or tiles, and the floor with carpeting. This passage was under the street itself, which separated Fouquet's house from the Park of Vincennes. At the end of the passage ascended a winding staircase parallel with that by which Fouquet had entered. He mounted these other stairs, entered by means of a spring placed in a closet similar to that in his cabinet, and from this closet an untenanted chamber furnished with the utmost elegance. As soon as he entered, he examined carefully whether the glass closed without leaving any trace, and, doubtless satisfied with his observation, he opened by means of a small gold key the triple fastenings of a door in front of him. This time the door opened upon a handsome cabinet, sumptuously furnished, in which was seated upon cushions a lady of surpassing beauty, who at the sound of the lock sprang towards Fouquet. "Ah! good heavens!" cried the latter, starting

back with astonishment. "Madame la Marquise de Belliere, you here?"

"Yes," murmured la marquise. "Yes; it is I, monsieur."

"Marquise! dear marquise!" added Fouquet, ready to prostrate himself. "Ah! my God! how did you come here? And I, to keep you waiting!"

"A long time, monsieur; yes, a very long time!"

"I am happy in thinking this waiting has appeared long to you, marquise!"

"Oh! an eternity, monsieur; oh! I rang more than twenty times. Did you not hear me?"

"Marquise, you are pale, you tremble."

"Did you not hear, then, that you were summoned?"

"Oh, yes; I heard plainly enough, madame; but I could not come. After your rigors and your refusals, how could I dream it was you? If I could have had any suspicion of the happiness that awaited me, believe me, madame, I would have quitted everything to fall at your feet, as I do at this moment."

"Are we quite alone, monsieur?" asked the marquise, looking round the room.

"Oh, yes, madame, I can assure you of that."

"Really?" said the marquise, in a melancholy tone.

"You sigh!" said Fouquet.

"What mysteries! what precautions!" said the marquise, with a slight bitterness of expression; "and how evident it is that you fear the least suspicion of your amours to escape."

"Would you prefer their being made public?"

"Oh, no; you act like a delicate man," said the marquise, smiling.

"Come, dear marquise, punish me not with reproaches, I implore you."

"Reproaches! Have I a right to make you any?"

"No, unfortunately, no; but tell me, you, who during a year I have loved without return or hope--"

"You are mistaken--without hope it is true, but not without return."

"What! for me, of my love! there is but one proof, and that proof I still want."

"I am here to bring it, monsieur."

Fouquet wished to clasp her in his arms, but she disengaged herself with a gesture.

"You persist in deceiving yourself, monsieur, and will never accept of me the only thing I am willing to give you--devotion."

"Ah, then, you do not love me? Devotion is but a virtue, love is a passion."

"Listen to me, I implore you: I should not have come hither without a serious motive: you are well assured of that, are you not?"

"The motive is of very little consequence, so that you are but here--so that I see you--so that I speak to you!"

"You are right; the principal thing is that I am here without any one having seen me, and that I can speak to you."--Fouquet sank on his knees before her. "Speak! speak, madame!" said he, "I listen to you."

The marquise looked at Fouquet, on his knees at her feet, and there was in the looks of the woman a strange mixture of love and melancholy. "Oh!" at length murmured she, "would that I were she who has the right of seeing you every minute, of speaking to you every instant! would that I were she who might watch over you, she who would have no need of mysterious springs to summon and cause to appear, like a sylph, the man she loves, to look at him for an hour, and then see him disappear in the darkness of a mystery, still more strange at his going out than at his coming in. Oh! that would be to live like a happy woman!"

"Do you happen, marquise," said Fouquet, smiling, "to be speaking of my wife?"

"Yes, certainly, of her I spoke."

"Well, you need not envy her lot, marquise; of all the women with whom I have had any relations, Madame Fouquet is the one I see the least of, and who has the least intercourse with me."

"At least, monsieur, she is not reduced to place, as I have done, her hand upon the ornament of a glass to call you to her; at least you do not reply to her by the mysterious, alarming sound of a bell, the spring of which comes from I don't know where; at least you have not forbidden

her to endeavor to discover the secret of these communications under pain of breaking off forever your connections with her, as you have forbidden all who come here before me, and who will come after me."

"Dear marquise, how unjust you are, and how little do you know what you are doing in thus exclaiming against mystery; it is with mystery alone we can love without trouble; it is with love without trouble alone that we can be happy. But let us return to ourselves, to that devotion of which you were speaking, or rather let me labor under a pleasing delusion, and believe this devotion is love."

"Just now," repeated the marquise, passing over her eyes a hand that might have been a model for the graceful contours of antiquity; "just now I was prepared to speak, my ideas were clear and bold; now I am quite confused, quite troubled; I fear I bring you bad news."

"If it is to that bad news I owe your presence, marquise, welcome be even that bad news! or rather, marquise, since you allow that I am not quite indifferent to you, let me hear nothing of the bad news, but speak of yourself."

"No, no, on the contrary, demand it of me; require me to tell it to you instantly, and not to allow myself to be turned aside by any feeling whatever. Fouquet, my friend! it is of immense importance."

"You astonish me, marquise; I will even say you almost frighten me. You, so serious, so collected; you who know the world we live in so well. Is it, then, important?"

"Oh! very important."

"In the first place, how did you come here?"

"You shall know that presently; but first to something of more consequence."

"Speak, marquise, speak! I implore you, have pity on my impatience."

"Do you know that Colbert is made intendant of the finances?"

"Bah! Colbert, little Colbert."

"Yes, Colbert, little Colbert."

"Mazarin's factotum?"

"The same."

"Well! what do you see so terrific in that, dear marquise? little

Colbert is intendant; that is astonishing I confess, but is not terrible."

"Do you think the king has given, without pressing motive, such a place to one you call a little cuistre?"

"In the first place, is it positively true that the king has given it to him?"

"It is so said."

"Ay, but who says so?"

"Everybody."

"Everybody, that's nobody; mention some one likely to be well informed who says so."

"Madame Vanel."

"Ah! now you begin to frighten me in earnest," said Fouquet, laughing; "if any one is well informed, or ought to be well informed, it is the person you name."

"Do not speak ill of poor Marguerite, Monsieur Fouquet, for she still loves you."

"Bah! indeed? That is scarcely credible. I thought little Colbert, as you said just now, had passed over that love, and left the impression upon it of a spot of ink or a stain of grease."

"Fouquet! Fouquet! Is this the way you always treat the poor creatures you desert?"

"Why, you surely are not going to undertake the defense of Madame Vanel?"

"Yes, I will undertake it; for, I repeat, she loves you still, and the proof is she saves you."

"But your interposition, marquise; that is very cunning on her part. No angel could be more agreeable to me, or could lead me more certainly to salvation. But, let me ask you, do you know Marguerite?"

"She was my convent friend."

"And you say that she has informed you that Monsieur Colbert was named intendant?"

"Yes, she did."

"Well, enlighten me, marquise; granted Monsieur Colbert is intendant--so be it. In what can an intendant, that is to say my subordinate, my clerk, give me umbrage or injure me, even if he is Monsieur Colbert?"

"You do not reflect, monsieur, apparently," replied the marquise.

"Upon what?"

"This: that Monsieur Colbert hates you."

"Hates me?" cried Fouquet. "Good heavens! marquise, whence do you come? where can you live? Hates me! why all the world hates me, he, of course, as others do."

"He more than others."

"More than others--let him."

"He is ambitious."

"Who is not, marquise."

"Yes, but with him ambition has no bounds."

"I am quite aware of that, since he made it a point to succeed me with Madame Vanel."

"And obtained his end; look at that."

"Do you mean to say he has the presumption to pass from intendant to superintendent?"

"Have you not yourself already had the same fear?"

"Oh! oh!" said Fouquet, "to succeed with Madame Vanel is one thing, to succeed me with the king is another. France is not to be purchased so easily as the wife of a maitre des comptes."

"Eh! monsieur, everything is to be bought; if not by gold, by intrigue."

"Nobody knows to the contrary better than you, madame, you to whom I have offered millions."

"Instead of millions, Fouquet, you should have offered me a true, only and boundless love: I might have accepted that. So you see, still, everything is to be bought, if not in one way, by another."

"So, Colbert, in your opinion, is in a fair way of bargaining for my place of superintendent. Make yourself easy on that head, my dear marquise; he is not yet rich enough to purchase it."

"But if he should rob you of it?"

"Ah! that is another thing. Unfortunately, before he can reach me, that is to say, the body of the place, he must destroy, must make a breach in the advanced works, and I am devilishly well fortified, marquise."

"What you call your advanced works are your creatures, are they not--your friends?"

"Exactly so."

"And is M. d'Eymeris one of your creatures?"

"Yes, he is."

"Is M. Lyodot one of your friends?"

"Certainly."

"M. de Vanin?"

"M. de Vanin! ah! they may do what they like with him, but--"

"But--"

"But they must not touch the others!"

"Well, if you are anxious they should not touch MM. d'Eymeris and Lyodot, it is time to look about you."

"Who threatens them?"

"Will you listen to me now?"

"Attentively, marquise."

"Without interrupting me?"

"Speak."

"Well, this morning Marguerite sent for me."

"And what did she want with you?"

"I dare not see M. Fouquet myself," said she."

"Bah! why should she think I would reproach her? Poor woman, she vastly deceives herself."

"'See him yourself,' said she, 'and tell him to beware of M. Colbert.'"

"What! she warned me to beware of her lover?"

"I have told you she still loves you."

"Go on, marquise."

"'M. Colbert,' she added, 'came to me two hours ago, to inform me he was appointed intendant.'"

"I have already told you, marquise, that M. Colbert would only be the more in my power for that."

"Yes, but that is not all: Marguerite is intimate, as you know, with Madame d'Eymeris and Madame Lyodot."

"I know it."

"Well, M. Colbert put many questions to her, relative to the fortunes of these two gentlemen, and as to the devotion they had for you."

"Oh, as to those two, I can answer for them; they must be killed before they will cease to be mine."

"Then, as Madame Vanel was obliged to quit M. Colbert for an instant to receive a visitor, and as M. Colbert is industrious, scarcely was the new intendant left alone, before he took a pencil from his pocket, and, there was paper on the table, began to make notes."

"Notes concerning d'Eymeris and Lyodot?"

"Exactly."

"I should like to know what those notes were about."

"And that is just what I have brought you."

"Madame Vanel has taken Colbert's notes and sent them to me?"

"No; but by a chance which resembles a miracle, she has a duplicate of those notes."

"How could she get that?"

"Listen; I told you that Colbert found paper on the table."

"Yes."

"That he took a pencil from his pocket."

"Yes."

"And wrote upon that paper."

"Yes."

"Well, this pencil was a lead-pencil, consequently hard; so, it marked in black upon the first sheet, and in white upon the second."

"Go on."

"Colbert, when tearing off the first sheet, took no notice of the second."

"Well?"

"Well, on the second was to be read what had been written on the first; Madame Vanel read it, and sent for me."

"Yes, yes."

"Then, when she was assured I was your devoted friend, she gave me the paper, and told me the secret of this house."

"And this paper?" said Fouquet, in some degree of agitation.

"Here it is, monsieur--read it," said the marquise.

Fouquet read:

"Names of the farmers of revenue to be condemned by the Chamber of Justice: D'Eymeris, friend of M. F.; Lyodot, friend of M. F.; De Vanin, indif."

"D'Eymeris and Lyodot!" cried Fouquet, reading the paper eagerly again.

"Friends of M. F.," pointed the marquise with her finger.

"But what is the meaning of these words: 'To be condemned by the Chamber of Justice'?"

"Dame!" said the marquise, "that is clear enough, I think. Besides, that is not all. Read on, read on," and Fouquet continued,--"The two

first to death, the third to be dismissed, with MM. d'Hautemont and de la Vallette, who will only have their property confiscated."

"Great God!" cried Fouquet, "to death, to death! Lyodot and D'Eymeris. But even if the Chamber of Justice should condemn them to death, the king will never ratify their condemnation, and they cannot be executed without the king's signature."

"The king has made M. Colbert intendant."

"Oh!" cried Fouquet, as if he caught a glimpse of the abyss that yawned beneath his feet, "impossible! impossible! But who passed a pencil over the marks made by Colbert?"

"I did. I was afraid the first would be effaced."

"Oh! I will know all."

"You will know nothing, monsieur; you despise your enemy too much for that."

"Pardon me, my dear marquise; excuse me; yes, M. Colbert is my enemy, I believe him to be so; yes, M. Colbert is a man to be dreaded, I admit. But I! I have time, and as you are here, as you have assured me of your devotion, as you have allowed me to hope for your love, as we are alone--"

"I came here to save you, Monsieur Fouquet, and not to ruin myself," said the marquise, rising--"therefore, beware!--"

"Marquise, in truth you terrify yourself too much at least, unless this terror is but a pretext--"

"He is very deep, very deep; this M. Colbert: beware!"

Fouquet, in his turn, drew himself up. "And I?" asked he.

"And you, you have only a noble heart. Beware! beware!"

"So?"

"I have done what was right, my friend, at the risk of my reputation. Adieu!"

"Not adieu, au revoir!"

"Perhaps," said the marquise, giving her hand to Fouquet to kiss, and walking towards the door with so firm a step, that he did not dare to bar her passage. As to Fouquet, he retook, with his head hanging down

and a fixed cloud on his brow, the path of the subterranean passage along which ran the metal wires that communicated from one house to the other, transmitting, through two glasses, the wishes and signals of hidden correspondents.

LV. The Abbe Fouquet.

Fouquet hastened back to his apartment by the subterranean passage, and immediately closed the mirror with the spring. He was scarcely in his well-known voice crying:--"Open the door, monseigneur, I entreat you, open the door!" Fouquet quickly restored a little order to everything that might have revealed either his absence or his agitation: he spread his papers over the desk, took up a pen, and, to gain time, said, through the closed door,--"Who is there?"

"What, monseigneur, do you not know me?" replied the voice.

"Yes, yes," said Fouquet to himself, "yes, my friend, I know you well enough." And then, aloud: "Is it not Gourville?"

"Why, yes, monseigneur."

Fouquet arose, cast a look at one of his glasses, went to the door, pushed back the bolt, and Gourville entered. "Ah! monseigneur! monseigneur!" cried he, "what cruelty!"

"In what?"

"I have been a quarter of an hour imploring you to open the door, and you would not even answer me."

"Once and for all, you know that I will not be disturbed when I am busy. Now, although I might make you an exception, Gourville, I insist upon my orders being respected by others."

"Monseigneur, at this moment, orders, doors, bolts, locks, and walls I could have broken, forced and overthrown!"

"Ah! ah! it relates to some great event, then?" asked Fouquet.

"Oh! I assure you it does, monseigneur," replied Gourville.

"And what is this event?" said Fouquet, a little troubled by the evident agitation of his most intimate confidant.

"There is a secret chamber of justice instituted, monseigneur."

"I know there is, but do the members meet, Gourville?"

"They not only meet, but they have passed a sentence, monseigneur."

"A sentence?" said the superintendent, with a shudder and pallor he

could not conceal. "A sentence!--and on whom?"

"Two of your best friends."

"Lyodot and D'Eymeris, do you mean? But what sort of a sentence?"

"Sentence of death."

"Passed? Oh! you must be mistaken, Gourville; that is impossible."

"Here is a copy of the sentence which the king is to sign to-day, if he has not already signed it."

Fouquet seized the paper eagerly, read it, and returned it to Gourville. "The king will never sign that," said he.

Gourville shook his head.

"Monseigneur, M. Colbert is a bold councilor: do not be too confident!"

"Monsieur Colbert again!" cried Fouquet. "How is it that that name rises upon all occasions to torment my ears, during the last two or three days? You make so trifling a subject of too much importance, Gourville. Let M. Colbert appear, I will face him; let him raise his head, I will crush him; but you understand, there must be an outline upon which my look may fall, there must be a surface upon which my feet may be placed."

"Patience, monseigneur; for you do not know what Colbert is--study him quickly; it is with this dark financier as it is with meteors, which the eye never sees completely before their disastrous invasion; when we feel them we are dead."

"Oh! Gourville, this is going too far," replied Fouquet, smiling; "allow me, my friend, not to be so easily frightened; M. Colbert a meteor! Corbleu, we confront the meteor. Let us see acts, and not words. What has he done?"

"He has ordered two gibbets of the executioner of Paris," answered Gourville.

Fouquet raised his head, and a flash gleamed from his eyes. "Are you sure of what you say?" cried he.

"Here is the proof, monseigneur." And Gourville held out to the superintendent a note communicated by a certain secretary of the Hotel de Ville, who was one of Fouquet's creatures.

"Yes, that is true," murmured the minister; "the scaffold may be

prepared, but the king has not signed; Gourville, the king will not sign."

"I shall soon know," said Gourville.

"How?"

"If the king has signed, the gibbets will be sent this evening to the Hotel de Ville, in order to be got up and ready by to-morrow morning."

"Oh! no, no!" cried the superintendent, once again; "you are all deceived, and deceive me in my turn; Lyodot came to see me only the day before yesterday; only three days ago I received a present of some Syracuse wine from poor D'Eymeris."

"What does that prove?" replied Gourville, "except that the chamber of justice has been secretly assembled, has deliberated in the absence of the accused, and that the whole proceeding was complete when they were arrested."

"What! are they, then, arrested?"

"No doubt they are."

"But where, when, and how have they been arrested?"

"Lyodot, yesterday at daybreak; D'Eymeris, the day before yesterday, in the evening, as he was returning from the house of his mistress; their disappearances had disturbed nobody; but at length M. Colbert all at once raised the mask, and caused the affair to be published; it is being cried by sound of trumpet, at this moment in Paris, and, in truth, monseigneur, there is scarcely anybody but yourself ignorant of the event."

Fouquet began to walk about in his chamber with an uneasiness that became more and more serious.

"What do you decide upon, monseigneur?" said Gourville.

"If it were really as easy as you say, I would go to the king," cried Fouquet. "But as I go to the Louvre, I will pass by the Hotel de Ville. We shall see if the sentence is signed."

"Incredulity! thou art the pest of all great minds," said Gourville, shrugging his shoulders.

"Gourville!"

"Yes," continued he, "and incredulity! thou ruinnest, as contagion

destroys the most robust health; that is to say, in an instant."

"Let us go," cried Fouquet; "desire the door to be opened, Gourville."

"Be cautious," said the latter, "the Abbe Fouquet is there."

"Ah! my brother," replied Fouquet, in a tone of annoyance; "he is there, is he? he knows all the ill news, then, and is rejoiced to bring it to me, as usual. The devil! if my brother is there, my affairs are bad, Gourville; why did you not tell me that sooner: I should have been the more readily convinced."

"Monseigneur calumniates him," said Gourville, laughing; "if he is come, it is not with a bad intention."

"What, do you excuse him?" cried Fouquet; "a fellow without a heart, without ideas; a devourer of wealth."

"He knows you are rich."

"And would ruin me."

"No, but he would have your purse. That is all."

"Enough! enough! A hundred thousand crowns per month, during two years. Corbleu! it is I that pay, Gourville, and I know my figures." Gourville laughed in a silent, sly manner. "Yes, yes, you mean to say it is the king pays," said the superintendent. "Ah, Gourville, that is a vile joke; this is not the place."

"Monseigneur, do not be angry."

"Well, then, send away the Abbe Fouquet; I have not a sou." Gourville made a step towards the door. "He has been a month without seeing me," continued Fouquet, "why could he not be two months?"

"Because he repents of living in bad company," said Gourville, "and prefers you to all his bandits."

"Thanks for the preference! You make a strange advocate, Gourville, to-day--the advocate of the Abbe Fouquet!"

"Eh! but everything and every man has a good side--their useful side, monseigneur."

"The bandits whom the abbe keeps in pay and drink have their useful side, have they? Prove that, if you please."

"Let the circumstance arise, monseigneur, and you will be very glad to

have these bandits under your hand."

"You advise me, then, to be reconciled to the abbe?" said Fouquet, ironically.

"I advise you, monseigneur, not to quarrel with a hundred or a hundred and twenty loose fellows, who, by putting their rapiers end to end, would form a cordon of steel capable of surrounding three thousand men."

Fouquet darted a searching glance at Gourville, and passing before him,--"That is all very well; let M. l'Abbe Fouquet be introduced," said he to the footman. "You are right, Gourville."

Two minutes after, the Abbe Fouquet appeared in the doorway, with profound reverence. He was a man of from forty to forty-five years of age, half churchman, half soldier,--a spadassin grafted upon an abbe; upon seeing that he had not a sword by his side, you might be sure he had pistols. Fouquet saluted him more as elder brother than as a minister.

"What can I do to serve you, monsieur l'abbe?" said he.

"Oh! oh! how coldly you speak to me, brother!"

"I speak like a man who is in a hurry, monsieur."

The abbe looked maliciously at Gourville, and anxiously at Fouquet, and said, "I have three hundred pistoles to pay to M. de Bregi this evening. A play debt, a sacred debt."

"What next?" said Fouquet bravely, for he comprehended that the Abbe Fouquet would not have disturbed him for such a want.

"A thousand to my butcher, who will supply no more meat."

"Next?"

"Twelve hundred to my tailor," continued the abbe; "the fellow has made me take back seven suits of my people's, which compromises my liveries, and my mistress talks of replacing me by a farmer of the revenue, which would be a humiliation for the church."

"What else?" said Fouquet.

"You will please to remark," said the abbe, humbly, "that I have asked nothing for myself."

"That is delicate, monsieur," replied Fouquet; "so, as you see, I wait."

"And I ask nothing, oh! no,--it is not for want of need, though, I assure you."

The minister reflected for a minute. "Twelve hundred pistoles to the tailor; that seems a great deal for clothes," said he.

"I maintain a hundred men," said the abbe, proudly; "that is a charge, I believe."

"Why a hundred men?" said Fouquet. "Are you a Richelieu or a Mazarin, to require a hundred men as a guard? What use do you make of these men?--speak."

"And do you ask me that?" cried the Abbe Fouquet; "ah! how can you put such a question,--why I maintain a hundred men? Ah!"

"Why, yes, I do put that question to you. What have you to do with a hundred men?--answer."

"Ingrate!" continued the abbe, more and more affected.

"Explain yourself."

"Why, monsieur the superintendent, I only want one valet de chambre, for my part, and even if I were alone, could help myself very well; but you, you who have so many enemies--a hundred men are not enough for me to defend you with. A hundred men!--you ought to have ten thousand. I maintain, then, these men in order that in public places, in assemblies, no voice may be raised against you; and without them, monsieur, you would be loaded with imprecations, you would be torn to pieces, you would not last a week; no, not a week, do you understand?"

"Ah! I did not know you were my champion to such an extent, monsieur le abbe."

"You doubt it!" cried the abbe. "Listen, then, to what happened, no longer ago than yesterday, in the Rue de la Hochette. A man was cheapening a fowl."

"Well, how could that injure me, abbe?"

"This way. The fowl was not fat. The purchaser refused to give eighteen sous for it, saying that he could not afford eighteen sous for the skin of a fowl from which M. Fouquet had sucked all the fat."

"Go on."

"The joke caused a deal of laughter," continued the abbe; "laughter at your expense, death to the devils! and the canaille were delighted."

The joker added, 'Give me a fowl fed by M. Colbert, if you like! and I will pay all you ask.' And immediately there was a clapping of hands. A frightful scandal! you understand; a scandal which forces a brother to hide his face."

Fouquet colored. "And you veiled it?" said the superintendent.

"No, for so it happened I had one of my men in the crowd; a new recruit from the provinces, one M. Menneville, whom I like very much. He made his way through the press, saying to the joker: 'Mille barbes! Monsieur the false joker, here's a thrust for Colbert!' 'And one for Fouquet,' replied the joker. Upon which they drew in front of the cook's shop, with a hedge of the curious round them, and five hundred as curious at the windows."

"Well?" said Fouquet.

"Well, monsieur, my Menneville spitted the joker, to the great astonishment of the spectators, and said to the cook:--'Take this goose, my friend, for it is fatter than your fowl.' That is the way, monsieur," ended the abbe, triumphantly, "in which I spend my revenues; I maintain the honor of the family, monsieur." Fouquet hung his head. "And I have a hundred as good as he," continued the abbe.

"Very well," said Fouquet, "give the account to Gourville, and remain here this evening."

"Shall we have supper?"

"Yes, there will be supper."

"But the chest is closed."

"Gourville will open it for you. Leave us, monsieur l'abbe, leave us."

"Then we are friends?" said the abbe, with a bow.

"Oh, yes, friends. Come, Gourville."

"Are you going out? You will not stay to supper, then?"

"I shall be back in an hour; rest easy, abbe." Then aside to Gourville,--"Let them put to my English horses," said he, "and direct the coachman to stop at the Hotel de Ville de Paris."