

Chapter LVI. M. de la Fontaine's Wine.

Carriages were already bringing the guests of Fouquet to Saint-Mande; already the whole house was getting warm with the preparations for supper, when the superintendent launched his fleet horses upon the roads to Paris, and going by the quays, in order to meet fewer people on the way, soon reached the Hotel de Ville. It wanted a quarter to eight. Fouquet alighted at the corner of the Rue de Long-Pont, and, on foot, directed his course towards the Place de Greve, accompanied by Gourville. At the turning of the Place they saw a man dressed in black and violet, of dignified mien, who was preparing to stop at Vincennes. He had before him a large hamper filled with bottles, which he had just purchased at the cabaret with the sign of "L'Image-de-Notre-Dame."

"Eh, but! that is Vatel! my maitre d'hotel!" said Fouquet to Gourville.

"Yes, monseigneur," replied the latter.

"What can he have been doing at the sign of L'Image-de-Notre-Dame?"

"Buying wine, no doubt."

"What! buy wine for me, at a cabaret?" said Fouquet. "My cellar, then, must be in a miserable condition!" and he advanced towards the maitre d'hotel, who was arranging his bottles in the carriage with the most minute care.

"Hola! Vatel," said he, in the voice of a master.

"Take care, monseigneur!" said Gourville, "you will be recognized."

"Very well! Of what consequence?--Vatel!"

The man dressed in black and violet turned round. He had a good and mild countenance, without expression--a mathematician minus the pride. A certain fire sparkled in the eyes of this personage, a rather sly smile played round his lips; but the observer might soon have remarked that this fire and this smile applied to nothing, enlightened nothing. Vatel laughed like an absent man, and amused himself like a child. At the sound of his master's voice he turned round, exclaiming: "Oh! monseigneur!"

"Yes, it is I. What the devil are you doing here, Vatel? Wine! You are buying wine at a cabaret in the Place de Greve!"

"But, monseigneur," said Vatel, quietly after having darted a hostile

glance at Gourville, "why am I interfered with here? Is my cellar kept in bad order?"

"No, certes, Vatel, no; but--"

"But what?" replied Vatel. Gourville touched Fouquet's elbow.

"Don't be angry, Vatel; I thought my cellar--your cellar--sufficiently well stocked for us to be able to dispense with recourse to the cellar of L'Image-de-Notre-Dame."

"Eh, monsieur," said Vatel, shrinking from monseigneur to monsieur with a degree of disdain: "your cellar is so well stocked that when certain of your guests dine with you they have nothing to drink."

Fouquet, in great surprise, looked at Gourville. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that your butler had not wine for all tastes, monsieur; and that M. de la Fontaine, M. Pelisson, and M. Conrart, do not drink when they come to the house--these gentlemen do not like strong wine. What is to be done, then?"

"Well, and therefore?"

"Well, then, I have found here a vin de Joigny, which they like. I know they come here once a week to drink at the Image-de-Notre-Dame. That is the reason I am making this provision."

Fouquet had no more to say; he was convinced. Vatel, on his part, had much more to say, without doubt, and it was plain he was getting warm. "It is just as if you would reproach me, monseigneur, for going to the Rue Planche Milbray, to fetch, myself, the cider M. Loret drinks when he comes to dine at your house."

"Loret drinks cider at my house!" cried Fouquet, laughing.

"Certainly he does, monsieur, and that is the reason why he dines there with pleasure."

"Vatel," cried Fouquet, pressing the hand of his maitre d'hotel, "you are a man! I thank you, Vatel, for having understood that at my house M. de la Fontaine, M. Conrart, and M. Loret are as great as dukes and peers, as great as princes, greater than myself. Vatel, you are a good servant, and I double your salary."

Vatel did not even thank his master, he merely shrugged his shoulders a little, murmuring this superb sentiment: "To be thanked for having done one's duty is humiliating."

"He is right," said Gourville, as he drew Fouquet's attention, by a gesture, to another point. He showed him a low-built tumbrel, drawn by two horses, upon which rocked two strong gibbets, bound together, back to back, by chains, whilst an archer, seated upon the cross-beam, suffered, as well as he could, with his head cast down, the comments of a hundred vagabonds, who guessed the destination of the gibbets, and were escorting them to the Hotel de Ville. Fouquet started. "It is decided, you see," said Gourville.

"But it is not done," replied Fouquet.

"Oh, do not flatter yourself, monseigneur; if they have thus lulled your friendship and suspicions--if things have gone so far, you will be able to undo nothing."

"But I have not given my sanction."

"M. de Lyonne has ratified for you."

"I will go to the Louvre."

"Oh, no, you will not."

"Would you advise such baseness?" cried Fouquet, "would you advise me to abandon my friends? would you advise me, whilst able to fight, to throw the arms I hold in my hand to the ground?"

"I do not advise you to do anything of the kind, monseigneur. Are you in a position to quit the post of superintendent at this moment?"

"No."

"Well, if the king wishes to displace you--"

"He will displace me absent as well as present."

"Yes, but you will not have insulted him."

"Yes, but I shall have been base; now I am not willing that my friends should die; and they shall not die!"

"For that it is necessary you should go to the Louvre, is it not?"

"Gourville!"

"Beware! once at the Louvre, you will be forced to defend your friends openly, that is to say, to make a profession of faith; or you will be forced to abandon them irrevocably."

"Never!"

"Pardon me;--the king will propose the alternative to you, rigorously, or else you will propose it to him yourself."

"That is true."

"That is the reason why conflict must be avoided. Let us return to Saint-Mande, monseigneur."

"Gourville, I will not stir from this place, where the crime is to be carried out, where my disgrace is to be accomplished; I will not stir, I say, till I have found some means of combating my enemies."

"Monseigneur," replied Gourville, "you would excite my pity, if I did not know you for one of the great spirits of this world. You possess a hundred and fifty millions, you are equal to the king in position, and a hundred and fifty millions his superior in money. M. Colbert has not even had the wit to have the will of Mazarin accepted. Now, when a man is the richest person in a kingdom, and will take the trouble to spend the money, if things are done he does not like, it is because he is a poor man. Let us return to Saint-Mande, I say."

"To consult with Pelisson?--we will."

"No, monseigneur, to count your money."

"So be it," said Fouquet, with angry eyes;--"yes, yes, to Saint-Mande!" He got into his carriage again, and Gourville with him. Upon their road, at the end of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, they overtook the humble equipage of Vatel, who was quietly conveying home his vin de Joigny. The black horses, going at a swift pace, alarmed, as they passed, the timid hack of the maitre d'hotel, who, putting his head out at the window, cried, in a fright, "Take care of my bottles!" [2]