

Chapter LVII. The Gallery of Saint-Mande.

Fifty persons were waiting for the superintendent. He did not even take the time to place himself in the hands of his valet de chambre for a minute, but from the perron went straight into the premier salon. There his friends were assembled in full chat. The intendant was about to order supper to be served, but, above all, the Abbe Fouquet watched for the return of his brother, and was endeavoring to do the honors of the house in his absence. Upon the arrival of the superintendent, a murmur of joy and affection was heard; Fouquet, full of affability, good humor, and munificence, was beloved by his poets, his artists, and his men of business. His brow, upon which his little court read, as upon that of a god, all the movements of his soul, and thence drew rules of conduct,--his brow, upon which affairs of state never impressed a wrinkle, was this evening paler than usual, and more than one friendly eye remarked that pallor. Fouquet placed himself at the head of the table, and presided gayly during supper. He recounted Vatel's expedition to La Fontaine, he related the history of Menneville and the skinny fowl to Pelisson, in such a manner that all the table heard it. A tempest of laughter and jokes ensued, which was only checked by a serious and even sad gesture from Pelisson. The Abbe Fouquet, not being able to comprehend why his brother should have led the conversation in that direction, listened with all his ears, and sought in the countenance of Gourville, or in that of his brother, an explanation which nothing afforded him. Pelisson took up the matter:--"Did they mention M. Colbert, then?" said he.

"Why not?" replied Fouquet; "if true, as it is said to be, that the king has made him his intendant?" Scarcely had Fouquet uttered these words, with a marked intention, than an explosion broke forth among the guests.

"The miser!" said one.

"The mean, pitiful fellow!" said another.

"The hypocrite!" said a third.

Pelisson exchanged a meaning look with Fouquet. "Messieurs," said he, "in truth we are abusing a man whom no one knows: it is neither charitable nor reasonable; and here is monsieur le surintendant, who, I am sure, agrees with me."

"Entirely," replied Fouquet. "Let the fat fowls of M. Colbert alone; our business to-day is with the faisans truffes of M. Vatel." This speech stopped the dark cloud which was beginning to throw its shade over the guests. Gourville succeeded so well in animating the poets with the vin de Joigny; the abbe, intelligent as a man who stands in need of his

host's money, so enlivened the financiers and the men of the sword, that, amidst the vapors of this joy and the noise of conversation, inquietudes disappeared completely. The will of Cardinal Mazarin was the text of the conversation at the second course and dessert; then Fouquet ordered bowls of sweetmeats and fountains of liquor to be carried into the salon adjoining the gallery. He led the way thither, conducting by the hand a lady, the queen, by his preference, of the evening. The musicians then supped, and the promenades in the gallery and the gardens commenced, beneath a spring sky, mild and flower-scented. Pelisson then approached the superintendent, and said: "Something troubles monseigneur?"

"Greatly," replied the minister; "ask Gourville to tell you what it is." Pelisson, on turning round, found La Fontaine treading upon his heels. He was obliged to listen to a Latin verse, which the poet had composed upon Vatel. La Fontaine had, for an hour, been scanning this verse in all corners, seeking some one to pour it out upon advantageously. He thought he had caught Pelisson, but the latter escaped him; he turned towards Sorel, who had, himself, just composed a quatrain in honor of the supper, and the Amphytrion. La Fontaine in vain endeavored to gain attention to his verses; Sorel wanted to obtain a hearing for his quatrain. He was obliged to retreat before M. le Comte de Charost, whose arm Fouquet had just taken. L'Abbe Fouquet perceived that the poet, absent-minded, as usual, was about to follow the two talkers; and he interposed. La Fontaine seized upon him, and recited his verses. The abbe, who was quite innocent of Latin, nodded his head, in cadence, at every roll which La Fontaine impressed upon his body, according to the undulations of the dactyls and spondees. While this was going on, behind the confiture-basins, Fouquet related the event of the day to his son-in-law, M. de Charost. "We will send the idle and useless to look at the fireworks," said Pelisson to Gourville, "whilst we converse here."

"So be it," said Gourville, addressing four words to Vatel. The latter then led towards the gardens the major part of the beaux, the ladies and the chatterers, whilst the men walked in the gallery, lighted by three hundred wax-lights, in the sight of all; the admirers of fireworks all ran away towards the garden. Gourville approached Fouquet, and said: "Monsieur, we are here."

"All?" said Fouquet.

"Yes,--count." The superintendent counted; there were eight persons. Pelisson and Gourville walked arm in arm, as if conversing upon vague and frivolous subjects. Sorel and two officers imitated them, and in an opposite direction. The Abbe Fouquet walked alone. Fouquet, with M. de Charost, walked as if entirely absorbed in the conversation of his son-in-law. "Messieurs," said he, "let no one of you raise his head as he walks, or appear to pay attention to me; continue walking, we are alone, listen to me."

A perfect silence ensued, disturbed only by the distant cries of the joyous guests, from the groves whence they beheld the fireworks. It was a whimsical spectacle this, of these men walking in groups, as if each one was occupied about something, whilst lending attention really only to one amongst them, who, himself, seemed to be speaking only to his companion. "Messieurs," said Fouquet, "you have, without doubt, remarked the absence of two of my friends this evening, who were with us on Wednesday. For God's sake, abbe, do not stop,--it is not necessary to enable you to listen; walk on, carrying your head in a natural way, and as you have excellent sight, place yourself at the window, and if any one returns towards the gallery, give us notice by coughing."

The abbe obeyed.

"I have not observed their absence," said Pelisson, who, at this moment, was turning his back to Fouquet, and walking the other way.

"I do not see M. Lyodot," said Sorel, "who pays me my pension."

"And I," said the abbe, at the window, "do not see M. d'Eymeris, who owes me eleven hundred livres from our last game of brelan."

"Sorel," continued Fouquet, walking bent, and gloomily, "you will never receive your pension any more from M. Lyodot; and you, abbe, will never be paid you eleven hundred livres by M. d'Eymeris; for both are doomed to die."

"To die!" exclaimed the whole assembly, arrested, in spite of themselves, in the comedy they were playing, by that terrible word.

"Recover yourselves, messieurs," said Fouquet, "for perhaps we are watched--I said: to die!"

"To die!" repeated Pelisson; "what, the men I saw six days ago, full of health, gayety, and the spirit of the future! What then is man, good God! that disease should thus bring him down all at once!"

"It is not a disease," said Fouquet.

"Then there is a remedy," said Sorel.

"No remedy. Messieurs de Lyodot and D'Eymeris are on the eve of their last day."

"Of what are these gentlemen dying, then?" asked an officer.

"Ask of him who kills them," replied Fouquet.

"Who kills them? Are they being killed, then?" cried the terrified chorus.

"They do better still; they are hanging them," murmured Fouquet, in a sinister voice, which sounded like a funeral knell in that rich gallery, splendid with pictures, flowers, velvet, and gold. Involuntarily every one stopped; the abbe quitted his window; the first fuses of the fireworks began to mount above the trees. A prolonged cry from the gardens attracted the superintendent to enjoy the spectacle. He drew near to a window, and his friends placed themselves behind him, attentive to his least wish.

"Messieurs," said he, "M. Colbert has caused to be arrested, tried and will execute my two friends; what does it become me to do?"

"Mordieu!" exclaimed the abbe, the first one to speak, "run M. Colbert through the body."

"Monseigneur," said Pelisson, "you must speak to his majesty."

"The king, my dear Pelisson, himself signed the order for the execution."

"Well!" said the Comte de Charost, "the execution must not take place, then; that is all."

"Impossible," said Gourville, "unless we could corrupt the jailers."

"Or the governor," said Fouquet.

"This night the prisoners might be allowed to escape."

"Which of you will take charge of the transaction?"

"I," said the abbe, "will carry the money."

"And I," said Pelisson, "will be the bearer of the words."

"Words and money," said Fouquet, "five hundred thousand livres to the governor of the conciergerie that is sufficient; nevertheless, it shall be a million, if necessary."

"A million!" cried the abbe; "why, for less than half, I would have half Paris sacked."

"There must be no disorder," said Pelisson. "The governor being gained, the two prisoners escape; once clear of the fangs of the law, they will call together the enemies of Colbert, and prove to the king that his young justice, like all other monstrosities, is not infallible."

"Go to Paris, then, Pelisson," said Fouquet, "and bring hither the two victims; to-morrow we shall see."

Gourville gave Pelisson the five hundred thousand livres. "Take care the wind does not carry you away," said the abbe; "what a responsibility. Peste! Let me help you a little."

"Silence!" said Fouquet, "somebody is coming. Ah! the fireworks are producing a magical effect." At this moment a shower of sparks fell rustling among the branches of the neighboring trees. Pelisson and Gourville went out together by the door of the gallery; Fouquet descended to the garden with the five last plotters.