

Chapter 8

THE GASCON.

We dare not affirm that Dame Fournichon was as discreet as she had promised to be, for she interrogated the first soldier whom she saw pass as to the name of the captain who had conducted the review. The soldier, more cautious than she, asked her why she wished to know.

"Because he has just been here," she replied, "and one likes to know to whom one has been talking."

The soldier laughed. "The captain who conducted the review would not have entered this hotel," said he.

"Why not; is he too great for that?"

"Perhaps so."

"Well, but it is not for himself that he wanted the hotel."

"For whom then?"

"For his friends."

"He would not lodge his friends here, I am sure."

"Peste! why, who can he be, then?"

"Well, my good woman, he who conducted the review is simply Monsieur le Duc Nogaret de Lavalette d'Epernon, peer of France, and colonel-general of infantry. What do you say to that?"

"That if it was he, he did me great honor."

"Did you hear him say 'parfandious'?"

"Oh! yes."

We may now judge if the 26th of October was impatiently expected. On the evening of the 25th a man entered, bearing a heavy bag, which he placed on Fournichon's table.

"It is the price of the repast ordered for to-morrow," said he.

"At how much a head?"

"At six livres."

"Will they have only one meal here?"

"That is all."

"Has the captain found them a lodging, then?"

"It appears so," said the messenger, who went, and declined to answer any more questions.

At last the much-desired day arrived; half-past twelve had just struck when some cavaliers stopped at the door of the hotel. One, who appeared to be their chief, came with two well-mounted lackeys. Each of them produced the seal of Cleopatra's head, and were received with all sorts of courtesies, especially the young man with the lackeys. Nevertheless, excepting this young man, they all seemed timid and preoccupied. Most of them dispersed, however, until supper-time, either to swell the crowd at the execution of Salcede, or to see Paris.

About two o'clock, others began to arrive. One man came in alone, without a hat, a cane in his hand, and swearing at Paris, where he said the thieves were so adroit that they had stolen his hat as he had passed through a crowd, without his being able to see who had taken it. However, he said, it was his own fault, for wearing a hat ornamented with such a superb diamond. At four o'clock, forty people had arrived.

"Is it not strange," said Fournichon to his wife, "they are all Gascons?"

"Well, what of that? The captain said they were all countrymen, and he is a Gascon. M. d'Epéron is from Toulouse."

"Then you still believe it was M. d'Epernon?"

"Did he not say three times the famous 'parfandious'?"

Very soon the five other Gascons arrived; the number of guests was complete. Never was such surprise painted on so many faces; for an hour nothing was heard but "saudioux," "mordioux!" and "cap de Bious!" and such noisy joy, that it seemed to the Fournichons that all Poitou and Languedoc were collected in their room. Some knew, and greeted each other.

"Is it not singular to find so many Gascons here?" asked one.

"No," replied Perducas de Pincornay, "the sign is tempting for men of honor."

"Ah! is it you?" said St. Maline, the gentleman with the lackeys, "you have not yet explained to me what you were about to do, when the crowd separated us."

"What was that?" asked Pincornay, reddening.

"How it happens that I met you on the road between Angoulême and Angers without a hat, as you are now?"

"It seems to interest you, monsieur?"

"Ma foi! yes. Poitiers is far from Paris, and you came from beyond Poitiers."

"Yes, from St. Andre de Cubsac."

"And without a hat?"

"Oh! it is very simple. My father has two magnificent horses, and he is quite capable of disinheriting me for the accident that has happened to one of them."

"What is that?"

"I was riding one of them when it took fright at the report of a gun that was fired close to me, and ran away; it made for the bank of the Dordogne and plunged in."

"With you?"

"No; luckily I had time to slip off, or I should have been drowned with him."

"Ah! then the poor beast was drowned?"

"Pardioux! you know the Dordogne--half a league across."

"And then?"

"Then I resolved not to return home, but to go away as far as possible from my father's anger."

"But your hat?"

"Diable! my hat had fallen."

"Like you."

"I did not fall; I slipped off."

"But your hat?"

"Ah! my hat had fallen. I sought for it, being my only resource, as I had come out without money."

"But how could your hat be a resource?"

"Saudieux! it was a great one, for I must tell you that the plume of this hat was fastened by a diamond clasp, that his majesty the emperor Charles V. gave to my grandfather, when, on his way from Spain to Flanders, he stopped at our castle."

"Ah! ah! and you have sold the clasp, and the hat with it. Then, my dear friend, you ought to be the richest of us all, and you should have bought another glove; your hands are not alike; one is as white as a

woman's, and the other as black as a negro's."

"But listen; as I turned to seek my hat I saw an enormous crow seize hold of it."

"Of your hat!"

"Or rather of the clasp; attracted by the glitter, and in spite of my cries, he flew away with it, and I saw it no more. So that, overwhelmed by this double loss, I did not dare to return home, but came to seek my fortune in Paris."

"Good!" cried a third, "the wind has changed into a crow. I heard you tell M. de Loignac that the wind had carried it away while you were reading a letter from your mistress."

"Now," cried St. Maline, "I have the honor of knowing M. d'Aubigne, who, though a brave soldier, writes well, and I recommend you to tell him the history of your hat; he will make a charming story of it."

Several stifled laughs were heard.

"Ah! gentlemen," cried the Gascon, "do you laugh at me?"

They turned away to laugh again.

Perducas threw a glance around him, and saw a young man near the

fireplace hiding his face in his hands. He thought it was to laugh, and, going up to him, struck him on the shoulder, saying--

"Eh! monsieur, if you laugh, at all events show your face."

The young man looked up; it was our friend Ernanton de Carmainges.

"I beg you will leave me alone," said he, "I was not thinking of you."

Pincornay turned away, grumbling; but at this moment an officer entered.

"M. de Loignac!" cried twenty voices.

At this name, known through all Gascony, every one rose and kept silence.