

Chapter 26

THE LOUVRE.

That same day, about noon, the king came out of his cabinet and called for M. d'Epernon. The duke, when he came, found the king attentively examining a young monk.

The king took D'Epernon aside, "Look, what an odd-looking monk," said he.

"Does your majesty think so?--I think him very ordinary."

"Really!" Then to the monk, the king said, "What is your name?"

"Brother Jacques, sire."

"Your family name?"

"Clement."

"Good. You have performed your commission very well."

"What commission, sire?" said the duke, with his wonted familiarity.

"Nothing!" said Henri. "It is a little secret between me and some one

you do not know."

"How strangely you look at the lad, sire! you embarrass him."

"It is true; I know not why, but it seems to me that I have seen him before; perhaps it was in a dream. Go, my child; I will send the letter to him who asks for it; be easy. D'Epernon, give him ten crowns."

"Thanks, sire," said the monk.

"You did not say that as if you meant it," said D'Epernon, who did not understand a monk despising ten crowns.

"I would rather have one of those beautiful Spanish knives on the wall," said Jacques.

"What! you do not prefer money?"

"I have made a vow of poverty."

"Give him a knife, then, and let him go, Lavalette," said the king.

The duke chose one of the least rich and gave it to him. Jacques took it, quite joyful to possess such a beautiful weapon. When he was gone, the king said to D'Epernon, "Duke, have you among your Forty-five two or three men who can ride?"

"Twelve, at least, sire; and in a month all will be good horsemen."

"Then choose two, and let them come to me at once."

The duke went out, and calling De Loignac, said to him, "Choose me two good horsemen, to execute a commission for his majesty."

De Loignac went to the gallery where they were lodged, and called M. de Carmainges and M. de St. Maline. They soon appeared, and were conducted to the duke, who presented them to the king, who dismissed the duke.

"You are of my Forty-five, then?" said he to the young men.

"I have that honor, sire," said St. Maline.

"And you, monsieur?"

"And I, also, sire," replied Carmainges; "and I am devoted to your majesty's service, as much as any one in the world."

"Good! Then mount your horses, and take the road to Tours--do you know it?"

"We will inquire."

"Go by Charenton."

"Yes, sire."

"And proceed till you overtake a man traveling alone."

"Will your majesty describe him?" said St. Maline.

"He has long arms and legs, and has a large sword by his side."

"May we know his name, sire?" asked Carmainges.

"He is called 'the Shade.'"

"We will ask the name of every traveler we see, sire."

"And we will search the hotels."

"When you find him, give him this letter."

Both the young men held out their hands.

The king was embarrassed. "What is your name?" said he.

"Ernanton de Carmainges, sire."

"And yours?"

"Rene de St. Maline."

"M. de Carmainges, you shall carry the letter, and you, M. de St. Maline, shall deliver it."

Ernanton took the precious deposit, and was going to place it in his doublet, when St. Maline stopped him, kissed the letter, and then returned it to Ernanton.

This made Henri smile. "Come, gentlemen," said he, "I see I shall be well served."--"Is this all, sire?"

"Yes, gentlemen; only our last recommendation. This letter is more precious than the life of a man--for your heads, do not lose it; give it secretly to the Shade, who will give you a receipt for it, which you will bring back to me; and, above all, travel as though it were on your own affairs. Go."

The two young men went out--Ernanton full of joy, and St. Maline filled with jealousy. M. d'Epernon waited for them, and wished to question them, but Ernanton replied: "M. le Duc, the king did not authorize us to speak."

They went to the stables, when the king's huntsman gave them two strong horses. M. d'Epernon would have followed them, but at that moment he was told that a man much wished to speak to him at once. "Who is he?" he asked.

"The lieutenant of the provost of the Ile de France."

"Parfandious! am I sheriff or provost?"

"No, monsieur; but you are a friend of the king, and, as such, I beg you to hear me," said a humble voice at his side.

The duke turned. Near him was a man, bowing perpetually.

"Who are you?" asked the duke.

"Nicholas Poulain, monsieur."

"And you wish to speak to me?"

"I beg for that favor."

"I have no time."

"Not even to hear a secret?"

"I hear a hundred every day."

"But this concerns the life of his majesty," said Poulain, in a low voice.

"Oh! oh! then come into my cabinet."

