

Chapter 41

THE LETTER OF M. DE MAYENNE.

The duchess seized the letter, opened it, and read it eagerly, while various expressions passed over her face, like clouds over the sky. When she had finished, she gave it to Mayneville to read. It was as follows:

"MY SISTER--I tried to do myself the work I should have left to others, and I have been punished for it. I have received a sword wound from the fellow whom you know. The worst of it is, that he has killed five of my men, and among them Boularon and Desnoises, who are my best, after which he fled. I must tell you that he was aided by the bearer of this letter, a charming young man, as you may see. I recommend him to you; he is discretion itself.

"One merit which he will have, I presume, in your eyes, my dear sister, is having prevented my conqueror from killing me, as he much wished, having pulled off my mask when I had fainted, and recognized me.

"I recommend you, sister, to discover the name and profession of this discreet cavalier; for I suspect him, while he interests me. To my offers of service, he replied that the master whom he served let him want for nothing.

"I can tell you no more about him, but that he pretends not to know me. I suffer much, but believe my life is not in danger. Send me my surgeon at once; I am lying like a horse upon straw, the bearer will tell you where.

"Your affectionate brother,

"MAYENNE."

When they had finished reading, the duchess and Mayneville looked at each other in astonishment. The duchess broke the silence first.

"To whom," said she, "do we owe the signal service that you have rendered us, monsieur?"

"To a man who, whenever he can, helps the weak against the strong."

"Will you give me some details, monsieur?"

Ernanton told all he had seen, and named the duke's place of retreat.

Madame de Montpensier and Mayneville listened with interest. When he had finished, the duchess said:

"May I hope, monsieur, that you will continue the work so well begun, and attach yourself to our house?"

These words, said in the gracious tone that the duchess knew so well how to use, were very flattering to Ernanton, after the avowal which he had made; but the young man, putting vanity aside, attributed them to simple curiosity.

He knew well that the king, in making it a condition that he should reveal the duchess's place of abode, had some object in view. Two interests contended within him--his love, _that_ he might sacrifice; and his honor, which he could not. The temptation was all the stronger, that by avowing his position near the king, he should gain an enormous importance in the eyes of the duchess; and it was not a light consideration for a young man to be important in the eyes of the Duchesse de Montpensier. St. Maline would not have resisted a minute. All these thoughts rushed through Ernanton's mind, but ended by making him stronger than before.

"Madame," said he, "I have already had the honor of telling M. de Mayenne that I serve a good master, who treats me too well for me to desire to seek another."

"My brother tells me in his letter, monsieur, that you seemed not to recognize him. How, if, you did not know him, then, did you use his name to penetrate to me?"

"M. de Mayenne seemed to wish to preserve his incognito, madame; and I, therefore, did not think I ought to recognize him; and it might have been disagreeable for the peasants to know what an illustrious guest

they were entertaining. Here there was no reason for secrecy; on the contrary, the name of M. de Mayenne opened the way to you; so I thought that here, as there, I acted rightly."

The duchess smiled, and said, "No one could extricate himself better from an embarrassing question: and you are, I must confess, a clever man."

"I see no cleverness in what I have had the honor of telling you, madame."

"Well, monsieur," said the duchess, impatiently, "I see clearly that you will tell nothing. You do not reflect that gratitude is a heavy burden for one of my house to bear; that you have twice rendered me a service, and that if I wished to know your name, or rather who you are--"

"I know, madame, you would learn it easily; but you would learn it from some one else, and I should have told nothing."

"He is always right," cried the duchess, with a look which gave Ernanton more pleasure than ever a look had done before. Therefore he asked no more, but like the gourmand who leaves the table when he thinks he has had the best bit, he bowed, and prepared to take leave.

"Then, monsieur, that is all you have to tell me?" asked the duchess.

"I have executed my commission, and it only remains for me to present my

humble respects to your highness."

The duchess let him go, but when the door shut behind him, she stamped her foot impatiently.

"Mayneville," said she, "have that young man followed."

"Impossible, madame; all our household are out, I myself am waiting for the event. It is a bad day on which to do anything else than what we have decided to do."

"You are right, Mayneville; but afterward--"

"Oh! afterward, if you please, madame."

"Yes; for I suspect him, as my brother does."

"He is a brave fellow, at all events; and really we are lucky, a stranger coming to render us such a service."

"Nevertheless, Mayneville, have him watched. But night is falling, and Valois must be returning from Vincennes."

"Oh! we have time before us; it is not eight o'clock, and our men have not arrived."

"All have the word, have they not?"

"All."--"They are trustworthy?"

"Tried, madame."

"How many do you expect?"

"Fifty; it is more than necessary, for besides them we have two hundred monks, as good as soldiers, if not better."

"As soon as our men have arrived, range your monks on the road."

"They are all ready, madame; they will intercept the way, our men will push the carriage toward them, the gates of the convent will be open, and will have but to close behind the carriage."

"Let us sup, then, Mayneville, it will pass the time. I am so impatient, I should like to push the hands of the clock."

"The hour will come; be easy."

"But our men?"

"They will be here; it is hardly eight."

"Mayneville, my poor brother asks for his surgeon; the best surgeon, the best cure for his wound, will be a lock of the Valois's shaved head, and

the man who should carry him that present, Mayneville, would be sure to be welcome."

"In two hours, madame, that man shall set out to find our dear duke in his retreat; he who went out of Paris as a fugitive shall return triumphantly."

"One word more, Mayneville; are our friends in Paris warned?"

"What friends?"--"The leaguers."

"Heaven forbid, madame; to tell a bourgeois is to tell all Paris. Once the deed is done, and the prisoner safe in the cloister, we can defend ourselves against an army. Then we should risk nothing by crying from the roof of the convent, 'We have the Valois!'"

"You are both skillful and prudent, Mayneville. Do you know, though, that my responsibility is great, and that no woman will ever have conceived and executed such a project?"

"I know it, madame; therefore I counsel you in trembling."

"The monks will be armed under their robes?"

"Yes."

"Mind you kill those two fellows whom we saw pass, riding at the sides

of the carriage, then we can describe what passes as pleases us best."

"Kill those poor devils, madame! do you think that necessary?"

"De Loignac! would he be a great loss?"

"He is a brave soldier."

"A parvenu, like that other ill-looking fellow who pranced on the left, with his fiery eyes and his black skin."

"Oh! that one I do not care so much about; I do not know him, and I agree with your highness in disliking his looks."

"Then you abandon him to me?" laughed the duchess.

"Oh! yes, madame. What I said was only for your renown, and the morality of the party that we represent."

"Good; Mayneville, I know you are a virtuous man, and I will sign you a certificate of it if you like. You need have nothing to do with it; they will defend the Valois and get killed. To you I recommend that young man."

"Who?"

"He who just left us; see if he be really gone, and if he be not some

spy sent by our enemies."

Mayneville opened the window, and tried to look out.

"Oh! what a dark night," said he.

"An excellent night: the darker the better. Therefore, good courage, my captain."

"Yes, but we shall see nothing."

"God, whom we fight for, will see for us."

Mayneville, who did not seem quite so sure of the intervention of Providence in affairs of this nature, remained at the window looking out.

"Do you see any one?" asked the duchess.

"No, but I hear the tramp of horses."

"It is they; all goes well." And the duchess touched the famous pair of golden scissors at her side.