

le Comte; I should have done so long ago, had I not been condemned to live."

"Adieu, and thank you," replied Joyeuse.

"Au revoir in another world."

And he went away rapidly, throwing a heavy purse of gold at the feet of the servant.

Chapter 57

HOW A GREAT LADY LOVED IN THE YEAR 1586.

The whistles which Ernanton had heard were really his signal. Thus, when the young man reached the door, he found Dame Fournichon on the threshold waiting for her customers with a smile, which made her resemble a mythological goddess painted by a Flemish painter, and in her large white hands she held a golden crown, which another hand, whiter and more delicate, had slipped in, in passing.

She stood before the door, so as to bar Ernanton's passage.

"What do you want?" said she to him.

"Were not three whistles given from one of those windows just now?"

"Yes."

"Well, they were to summon me."

"You?"

"Yes."

"On your honor?"

"As a gentleman, Dame Fournichon."

"Enter, then, monsieur, enter."

And happy at having a client after her own heart, fit for the "Rose-tree of love," the hostess conducted Ernanton up the stairs herself. A little door, vulgarly painted, gave access to a sort of antechamber, which led to a room, furnished, decorated, and carpeted with rather more luxury than might have been expected in this remote corner of Paris; but this was Madame Fournichon's favorite room and she had exerted all her taste to embellish it.

When the young man entered the antechamber, he smelled a strong aromatic odor, the work, doubtless, of some susceptible person, who had thus tried to overcome the smell of cooking exhaled from the kitchen.

Ernanton, after opening the door, stopped for an instant to contemplate one of those elegant female figures which must always command attention, if not love. Reposing on cushions, enveloped in silk and velvet, this lady was occupied in burning in the candle the end of a little stick of aloes, over which she bent so as to inhale the full perfume. By the manner in which she threw the branch in the fire, and pulled her hood over her masked face, Ernanton perceived that she had heard him enter, but she did not turn.

"Madame," said the young man, "you sent for your humble servant--here he is."

"Ah! very well," said the lady; "sit down, I beg, M. Ernanton."

"Pardon, madame, but before anything I must thank you for the honor that you do me."

"Ah! that is civil, and you are right; but I presume you do not know whom you are thanking, M. de Carmainges."

"Madame, you have your face hidden by a mask and your hands by gloves; I cannot then recognize you--I can but guess."

"And you guess who I am?"

"Her whom my heart desires, whom my imagination paints, young, beautiful, powerful, and rich; too rich and too powerful for me to be able to believe that what has happened to me is real, and that I am not dreaming."

"Had you any trouble to enter here?" asked the lady, without replying directly to the words which had escaped from the full heart of Ernanton.

"No, madame; the admittance was easier than I could have thought."

"Yes, all is easy for a man; it is so different for a woman. What were you saying before, monsieur?" added she, carelessly, and pulling off her glove to show a beautiful hand, at once plump and taper.

"I said, madame, that without having seen your face, I know who you are, and without fear of making a mistake, may say that I love you."

"Then you are sure that I am her whom you expected to find here?"

"My heart tells me so."

"Then you know me?"

"Yes."

"Really! you, a provincial, only just-arrived, you already know the women of Paris?"

"In all Paris, madame, I know but one."

"And that is me?"

"I believe so."

"By what do you recognize me?"

"By your voice, your grace, and your beauty."

"My voice, perhaps; I cannot disguise it. My grace; I may appropriate the compliment; but as for my beauty, it is veiled."

"It was less so, madame, on the day when, to bring you into Paris, I held you so near to me that your breast touched my shoulders, and I felt your breath on my neck."

"Then, on the receipt of my letter, you guessed that it came from me?"

"Oh! no, madame, not for a moment; I believed I was the subject of some joke, or the victim of some error, and it is only during the last few minutes that, seeing you, touching you--" and he tried to take her hand, but she withdrew it.

"Enough!" said the lady; "the fact is, that I have committed a great folly."

"In what, madame?"

"In what? You say that you know me, and then ask."

"Oh! it is true, madame, that I am very insignificant and obscure near your highness."

"Mon Dieu! monsieur, pray be silent. Have you no sense?"

"What have I done?" cried Ernanton, frightened.

"You see me in a mask, and if I wear one, it is for disguise, and yet you call me your highness."

"Ah, pardon me, madame," said Ernanton, "but I believed in the discretion of these walls."

"It appears you are credulous."

"Alas! madame, I am in love."

"And you are convinced that I reciprocate this love?"

Ernanton rose piqued.

"No, madame," replied he.

"Then what do you believe?"

"I believe that you have something important to say to me, and that, not wishing to receive me at your hotel, or at Bel-Esbat, you preferred this isolated spot."

"You thought that?"--"Yes."

"And what do you think I could have to say to you?" asked the lady, rather anxiously.

"How can I tell? Perhaps something about M. de Mayenne."

"Had you not already told me all you knew of him?"

"Perhaps, then, some question about last night's event."

"What event? of what do you speak?" asked the lady, visibly agitated.

"Of the panic experienced by M. d'Epernon and the arrest of the Lorraine gentlemen."

"They arrested them?"

"Yes, those who were found on the road to Vincennes."

"Which is also the road to Soissons, where M. de Guise holds his garrison. Ah! M. Ernanton, you, who belong to the court, can tell me why they arrested these gentlemen."

"I belong to the court?"

"Certainly."

"You know that, madame?"

"Ah! to find out your address, we were forced to make inquiries. But what resulted from all this?"

"Nothing, madame, to my knowledge."

"Then why did you think I should wish to speak of it?"

"I am wrong again, madame."

"From what place are you, monsieur?"

"From Agen."

"What, you are a Gascon! and yet are not vain enough to suppose that

when I saw you at the Porte St. Antoine, on the day of Salcede's execution, I liked your looks."

Ernanton reddened, and looked confused.

The lady went on. "That I met you in the street, and found you handsome."

Ernanton grew scarlet.

"That afterward, when you brought me a message from my brother, I liked you."

"Madame, I never thought so, I protest."

"Then you were wrong," said the lady, turning on him two eyes which flashed through her mask.

Ernanton clasped his hands.

"Madame, are you mocking me?" cried he.

"Ma foi! no. The truth is, that you pleased me."

"Mon Dieu!"

"But you yourself dared to declare your love to me."

"But then I did not know who you were, madame; and now that I do know, I humbly ask your pardon."

"Oh!" cried the lady, "say all you think, or I shall regret having come."

Ernanton fell on his knees.

"Speak, madame, speak, that I may be sure this is not all a dream, and perhaps I shall dare to answer."

"So be it. Here are my projects for you," said the lady, gently pushing Ernanton back, while she arranged the folds of her dress; "I fancy you, but I do not yet know you. I am not in the habit of resisting my fancies; but I never commit follies. Had we been equals, I should have received you at my house, and studied you before I hinted at my feelings; but as that was impossible, I was driven to this interview; now you know what to do; be worthy of me, it is all I ask."

Ernanton exhausted himself in protestations.

"Oh! less warmth, M. de Carmainges, I beg; it is not worth while," replied she, carelessly. "Perhaps it was only your name that pleased me; perhaps it is a caprice, and will pass away. However, do not think yourself too far from perfection, and begin to despair. I hate perfect people, but I adore devoted ones; remember that."

Ernanton was beside himself. This haughty language and proud superiority, yet this frank declaration and abandon, terrified and yet delighted him. He seated himself near the proud and beautiful lady, and then tried to pass his arm behind the cushions on which she reclined.

"Monsieur," said she, "it appears you have heard, but not understood me. No familiarity, if you please; let us each remain in our places. Some day I shall give you the right to call me yours; but this right you have not yet."

Ernanton rose, pale and angry.

"Excuse me, madame," said he, "it seems I commit nothing but follies here; I am not yet accustomed to the habits of Paris. Among us in the provinces, 200 leagues off, when a woman says 'I love,' she loves, and does not hold herself aloof, or take pretexts for humiliating the man at her feet. It is your custom as a Parisian, and your right as a princess. I accept it, therefore, only I have not been accustomed to it. The habit, doubtless, will come in time."

"Ah! you are angry, I believe," said the duchess, haughtily.

"I am, madame, but it is against myself; for I have for you, madame, not a passing caprice, but a real love. It is your heart I seek to obtain, and therefore I am angry with myself for having compromised the respect that I owe you, and which I will only change into love when you

command me. From this moment, madame, I await your orders."

"Come, come, do not exaggerate, M. de Carmainges; now you are all ice, after being all flame."

"It seems to me, however, madame--"

"A truce to politeness; I do not wish to play the princess. Here is my hand, take it; it is that of a simple woman."

Ernanton took this beautiful hand respectfully.

"Well, you do not kiss it!" cried the duchess; "are you mad, or have you sworn to put me in a passion?"

"But just now--"

"Just now I drew it away, while now I give it to you."

Ernanton kissed the hand, which was then withdrawn.

"Another lesson," said he. "Assuredly you will end by killing my passion. I may adore you on my knees; but I should have neither love nor confidence for you."

"Oh! I do not wish that, for you would be a sad lover, and it is not so that I like them. No, remain natural, be yourself, M. Ernanton, and

nothing else. I have caprices. Oh! mon Dieu, you told me I was beautiful, and all beautiful women have them. Do not fear me; and when I say to the too impetuous Ernanton, 'Calm yourself,' let him consult my eyes and not my voice."

At these words she rose.

It was time, for the young man seized her in his arms, and his lips touched her mask; but through this mask her eyes darted such a flaming glance that he drew back.

"Well," said she, "we shall meet again. Decidedly you please me, M. de Carmainges." Ernanton bowed.

"When are you free?" asked she.

"Alas! very rarely, madame."

"Ah! your service is fatiguing, is it not?"

"What service?"

"That which you perform near the king. Are you not some kind of guard to his majesty?"

"I form part of a body of gentlemen, madame."

"That is what I mean. They are all Gascons, are they not?"

"Yes, madame."

"How many are there? I forget."

"Forty-five."

"What a singular number!"

"I believe it was chance."

"And these forty-five gentlemen never quit the king, you say?"

"I did not say so, madame."

"Ah! I thought you did; at least, you said you had very little liberty."

"It is true, I have very little; because by day we are on service near the king, and at night we stay at the Louvre."

"In the evening?"

"Yes."

"Every evening?"

"Nearly."

"What would have happened then this evening, if your duty had kept you? I, who waited for you, and should have been ignorant of the cause of your absence, should have thought my advances despised."

"Ah! madame, to see you I will risk all, I swear to you."

"It would be useless and absurd; I do not wish it."

"But then--"

"Do your duty; I will arrange, who am free and mistress of my time."

"What goodness, madame!"

"But you have not explained to me," said the duchess, with her insinuating smile, "how you happened to be free this evening, and how you came."

"This evening, madame, I was thinking of asking permission of De Loignac, our captain, who is very kind to me, when the order came to give a night's holiday to the Forty-five."

"And on what account was this leave given?"

"As recompense, I believe, madame, for a somewhat fatiguing service

yesterday at Vincennes."

"Ah! very well."

"Therefore to this circumstance I owe the pleasure of seeing you to-night at my ease."

"Well! listen, Carmainges," said the duchess, with a gentle familiarity which filled the heart of the young man with joy; "this is what you must do, whenever you think you shall be at liberty--send a note here to the hostess, and every day I will send a man to inquire."

"Oh! mon Dieu! madame, you are too good!"

"What is that noise?" said the duchess, laying her hand on his arm.

Indeed, a noise of spurs, of voices, of doors shutting, and joyous exclamations, came from the room below, like the echo of an invasion. Ernanton looked out.

"It is my companions," said he, "who have come here to spend their holiday."

"But by what chance? just where we are."

"Because it is just here, madame, that we each had a rendezvous on our arrival, and on the happy day of their entry in Paris my friends

conceived an affection for the wine and the cooking of M. Fournichon.
But you, how did you come to choose this place?"

"I chose, and you will easily understand that, the most deserted part of Paris, a place near the river, where no one was likely to recognize me, or suspect that I could come; but, mon Dieu! how noisy your companions are."

Indeed, the noise was becoming a perfect storm, but all at once they heard a sound of footsteps on the little staircase which led to their room, and Madame Fournichon's voice, crying, from below, "M. de St. Maline, M. de St. Maline!"

"Well!" replied the young man.

"Do not go up there, I beg!"

"And why not, dear Madame Fournichon? is not all the house ours to-night?"--"Not the turrets."

"Bah! they are part of the house," cried five or six voices.

"No, they are not; they are private; do not disturb my lodgers."

"Do not disturb me, Madame Fournichon," replied St. Maline.

"For pity's sake!" cried Madame Fournichon.

"Madame," replied he, "it is midnight, and at nine all fires ought to be extinguished; there is a fire now in your turret, and I must see what disobedient subject is transgressing the king's edicts."

And St. Maline continued to advance, followed by several others.

"Mon Dieu! M. de Carmainges," cried the duchess, "will those people dare to enter here?"

"I am here, madame; have no fear."

"Oh! they are forcing the doors," cried she.

Indeed, St. Maline rushed so furiously against the door, that, being very slight, it was at once broken open.