

Chapter 88

FATALITY.

The next morning, about nine o'clock, the beautiful rays of the sun were glistening like gold on the graveled walks of Chateau-Thierry. Numerous gangs of workmen, who had the previous evening been directed to be in attendance, had been actively at work from daybreak upon the preparations in the park, as well as in the decoration of the apartments destined to receive the king, whose arrival was momentarily expected. As yet nothing was stirring in the pavilion where the duke reposed, for he had on the previous evening forbidden his two old servants to awaken him. They were to wait until he summoned them. Toward half-past nine two couriers rode at full speed into the town, announcing his majesty's near arrival. The civic authorities, the governor, and the garrison formed themselves in ranks on either side of the road, leaving a passage for the royal procession. At ten o'clock the king appeared at the foot of the hill; he had mounted his horse when they had taken their last relays. He never neglected an opportunity of doing so, especially when entering towns, as he rode admirably. The queen-mother followed him in a litter; fifty gentlemen belonging to the court, richly clad and admirably mounted, followed in their suite. A company of the guards, followed by Crillon himself, a hundred and twenty of the Swiss, and as many of the Scotch guards, commanded by Larchant, and all the members of the royal household who accompanied the king in his excursions, mules,

coffers, and domestic servants, formed a numerous army, the files of which followed the windings of the road leading from the river to the summit of the hill. Lastly, the cortege entered the town amid the ringing of the church bells, the roar of cannon, and bursts of music. The acclamations of the inhabitants were enthusiastic; for a visit from the king was of such rare occurrence at that time that, seen thus closely, he seemed to be a living embodiment of divine right. The king, as he progressed through the crowd, looked on all sides for his brother, but in vain. He only found Henri du Bouchage waiting for him at the gate of the chateau.

When once within the chateau, Henri III. inquired after the health of the Duc d'Anjou from the officer who had assumed the high distinction of receiving the king.

"Sire," replied the latter, "his highness, during the last few days, has been residing in the pavilion in the park, and we have not yet seen him this morning. It is most probable, however, that as he was well yesterday, he is well also to-day."

"This pavilion is in a very retired part of the park, it seems," said Henri, in a tone of displeasure, "since the sound of the cannon does not seem to have been heard."

"Sire," one of the duke's two aged attendants ventured to remark, "his highness did not, perhaps, expect your majesty so soon."

"Old fool," growled Henri, "do you think, then, that a king presents himself in this way at other people's residences without informing them of it? Monsieur le Duc d'Anjou has been aware of my intended arrival since yesterday."

And then, afraid of casting a gloom over those around him by a grave or sullen countenance, Henri, who wished to appear gentle and amiable at the expense of his brother Francois, exclaimed, "Well, then, since he has not come to meet us, we will go to meet him."

"Show us the way there," said Catherine, from the litter.

All the escort followed the road leading to the old park.

At the very moment that the guards, who were in advance, approached the hedge, a shrill and piercing cry rent the air.

"What is that?" said the king, turning toward his mother.

"Great Heaven!" murmured Catherine, endeavoring to read the faces of those around her, "it sounded like a cry of distress or despair."

"My prince! my poor master!" cried Francois' other aged attendant, appearing at the window, and exhibiting signs of the most passionate grief.

Every one hastened toward the pavilion, the king himself being hurried

along with the others. He arrived at the very moment when they were raising from the floor the Duc d'Anjou's body, which his valet-de-chambre, having entered without authority, in order to announce the king's arrival, had just perceived lying on the carpet of the bedroom. The prince was cold, stiff, and perfectly inanimate, and it was only by a strange movement of the eyelids and a nervous contraction of the lips that it could be observed he was still alive. The king paused at the threshold of the door, and those behind him followed his example.

[Illustration: THE PRINCE WAS COLD, STIFF, AND PERFECTLY INANIMATE.]

"This is an ugly omen," he murmured.

"Do not enter, my son, I implore you," said Catherine to him.

"Poor Francois!" said Henri, delighted at being sent away, and thus being spared the spectacle of this agonizing scene.

The crowd, too, followed the king as he withdrew.

"Strange! strange!" murmured Catherine, kneeling down by the side of the prince, or rather of the corpse, no one being in the room, with her but the two old servants; and while the messengers were dispatched in every quarter of the town to find the prince's physician, and while a courier galloped off to Paris in order to hasten the attendance of the king's physicians, who had remained at Meaux with the queen, Catherine, with

less knowledge, very probably, but not with less perspicacity than Miron himself could possibly have shown, examined the diagnostics of that singular malady which had struck down her son so suddenly.

Her experience was by no means indifferent; in the first place, therefore, she interrogated calmly, and without confusing them, the two attendants, who were tearing their hair and wringing their hands in the wildest despair.

Both of them replied that the prince had returned on the previous evening about nightfall, after having been disturbed at an inconvenient hour by Monsieur du Bouchage, who had arrived with a message from the king.

They then added that when the audience had terminated, which had been held in the chateau itself, the prince had ordered supper to be prepared, and had desired that no one should venture to approach the pavilion without being summoned; and lastly, that he had given the strictest injunctions not to be awakened in the morning, and that no one should enter without a positive summons.

"He probably expected a visit from a lady?" observed the queen-mother, inquiringly.

"We think so, madame," replied the valet respectfully, "but we could not discreetly assure ourselves of the fact."

"But in removing the things from the table, you must have seen whether my son had supped alone?"

"We have not yet removed the things, madame, since the orders of monseigneur were that no one should enter the pavilion."

"Very good," said Catherine; "no one, therefore, has been here?"

"No one, madame."

"You may go."

And Catherine was now left quite alone in the room. Leaving the prince lying on the bed where he had been placed, she immediately commenced the minutest investigation of each symptom or of each of the traces to which her attention was directed, as the result of her suspicions or apprehensions.

She had remarked that Francois' forehead was stained or dyed of a bister color, his eyes were bloodshot and encircled with blue lines, his lips marked with furrows, like the impression which burning sulphur leaves on living flesh.

She observed the same sign upon his nostrils and upon the sides of the nose.

"Now let me look carefully," she said, gazing about her on every side.

The first thing she remarked was the candlestick in which the flambeau which Remy had lighted the previous evening had burned away.

"This candle has burned for a length of time," she said, "and shows that Francois was a long time in this room. Ah! here is a bouquet lying on the carpet."

Catherine picked it up eagerly, and then, remarking that all its flowers were still fresh, with the exception of a rose, which was blackened and dried up:

"What does this mean?" she said; "what has been poured on the leaves of this flower? If I am not mistaken, I know a liquid which withers roses in this manner." She threw aside the bouquet, shuddering as she did so.

"That explains to me the state of the nostrils and the manner in which the flesh of the face is affected; but the lips?"

Catherine ran to the dining-room. The valets had spoken the truth, for there was nothing to indicate that anything on the table had been touched since the previous evening's repast had been finished.

Upon the edge of the table lay the half of a peach, in which the impression of a row of teeth was still visible. Catherine's attention was drawn to this in a particular manner, for the fruit, usually of a rich crimson near the core, had become as black as the rose, and was

discolored by violet and brown spots. The corrosive action was more especially visible upon the part which had been cut, and particularly so where the knife must have passed.

"This explains the state of the lips," she said; "but Francois had only bitten one piece out of this peach. He did not keep the bouquet long in his hand, for the flowers are still fresh; the evil may yet be repaired, for the poison cannot have penetrated very deeply.

"And yet, if the evil be merely superficial, why should this paralysis of the senses be so complete, and why indeed should the decomposition of the flesh have made so much progress? There must be more that I have not seen."

And as she spoke Catherine again looked all round her, and observed, hanging by a silver chain to its pole, the red and blue parrot to which Francois was so attached.

The bird was dead, stiff, and the feathers of its wings rough and erect.

Catherine again looked closely and attentively at the torch which she had once before already narrowly inspected, to satisfy herself that, by its having burned out completely, the prince had returned early in the evening.

"The smoke," said Catherine to herself; "the smoke! the wick of that torch was poisoned; my son is a dead man."

She called out immediately, and the chamber was in a minute filled with attendants and officers of the household.

"Miron, Miron!" cried some of them.

"A priest!" exclaimed the others.

But Catherine had, in the meantime, placed to the lips of Francois one of the small bottles which she always carried in her alms-bag, and narrowly watched her son's features to observe the effect of the antidote she applied.

The duke immediately opened his eyes and mouth, but no glance of intelligence gleamed in his eyes, no voice or sound escaped from his lips.

Catherine, in sad and gloomy silence, quitted the apartment, beckoning to the two attendants to follow her, before they had as yet had an opportunity of communicating with any one.

She then led them into another chamber, where she sat down, fixing her eyes closely and watchfully on their faces.

"Monsieur le Duc d'Anjou," she said, "has been poisoned some time during his supper last evening; and it was you who served the supper."

At these words the two men turned as pale as death.

"Torture us, kill us, if you will," they said; "but do not accuse us."

"Fools that you are; do you suppose that if I suspected you, that would have already been done? You have not yourselves, I know, assassinated your master, but others have killed him; and I must know who the murderers are. Who has entered the pavilion?"

"An old man, wretchedly clothed, whom monseigneur has seen during the last two days."

"But the woman--"

"We have not seen her--what woman does your majesty mean?"

"A woman has been here, who made a bouquet--"

The two attendants looked at each other with an expression of such simple surprise that Catherine perceived, by this glance alone, how perfectly innocent they were.

"Let the governor of the town and the governor of the chateau be sent for," she said. The two valets hurried to the door.

"One moment!" exclaimed Catherine, fixing them in their places by this single word as they approached the threshold. "You only and myself are

aware of what I have just told you; I shall not breathe a word about it; if any one learns it, therefore, it will be from or through one of you; on that very day both your lives shall be forfeited. Now, go!"

Catherine interrogated the two governors with more reserve. She told them that the duke had received from some person or persons a distressing intelligence which had deeply affected him; that that alone was the cause of his illness, and that if the duke had an opportunity of putting a few further questions to the persons again, he would in all probability soon recover from the alarm into which he had been thrown.

The governors instituted the minutest search in the town, the park, the environs, but no one knew what had become of Remy and Diana.

Henri alone knew the secret, and there was no danger of his betraying it.

Throughout the whole day, the terrible news, commented upon, exaggerated, and mutilated, circulated through Chateau-Thierry and the province; every one explained, according to his own individual character and disposition, the accident which had befallen the duke.

But no one, except Catherine and Du Bouchage, ventured to acknowledge that the chance of saving the duke's life was hopeless.

The unhappy prince did not recover either his voice or his senses, or rather, he ceased to give any sign of intelligence.

The king, who was immediately beset with the gloomiest fancies, which he dreaded more than anything, would very willingly have returned to Paris; but the queen-mother opposed his departure, and the court was obliged to remain at the chateau.

Physicians arrived in crowds; Miron alone guessed the cause of the illness, and formed an opinion upon its serious nature and extent; but he was too good a courtier to confess the truth, especially after he had consulted Catherine's looks.

He was questioned on all sides, and he replied that Monsieur le Duc d'Anjou must certainly have suffered from some seriously-disturbing cause, and had been subjected to some violent mental shock.

In this way he avoided compromising himself, therefore, which is a very difficult matter in such a case.

When Henri III. required him to answer affirmatively or negatively to his question, "Whether the duke would live?" he replied,

"I will answer your majesty in three days."

"And when will you tell me?" said Catherine, in a low voice.

"You, madame, are very different; I answer you unhesitatingly."--"Well?"

"Your majesty has but to interrogate me."

"On what day will my son die, Miron?"

"To-morrow evening, madame."

"So soon?"

"Ah! madame," murmured the physician, "the dose was by no means a slight one."

Catherine placed one of her fingers on her lips, looked at the dying man, and repeated in an undertone this sinister word, "Fatality!"