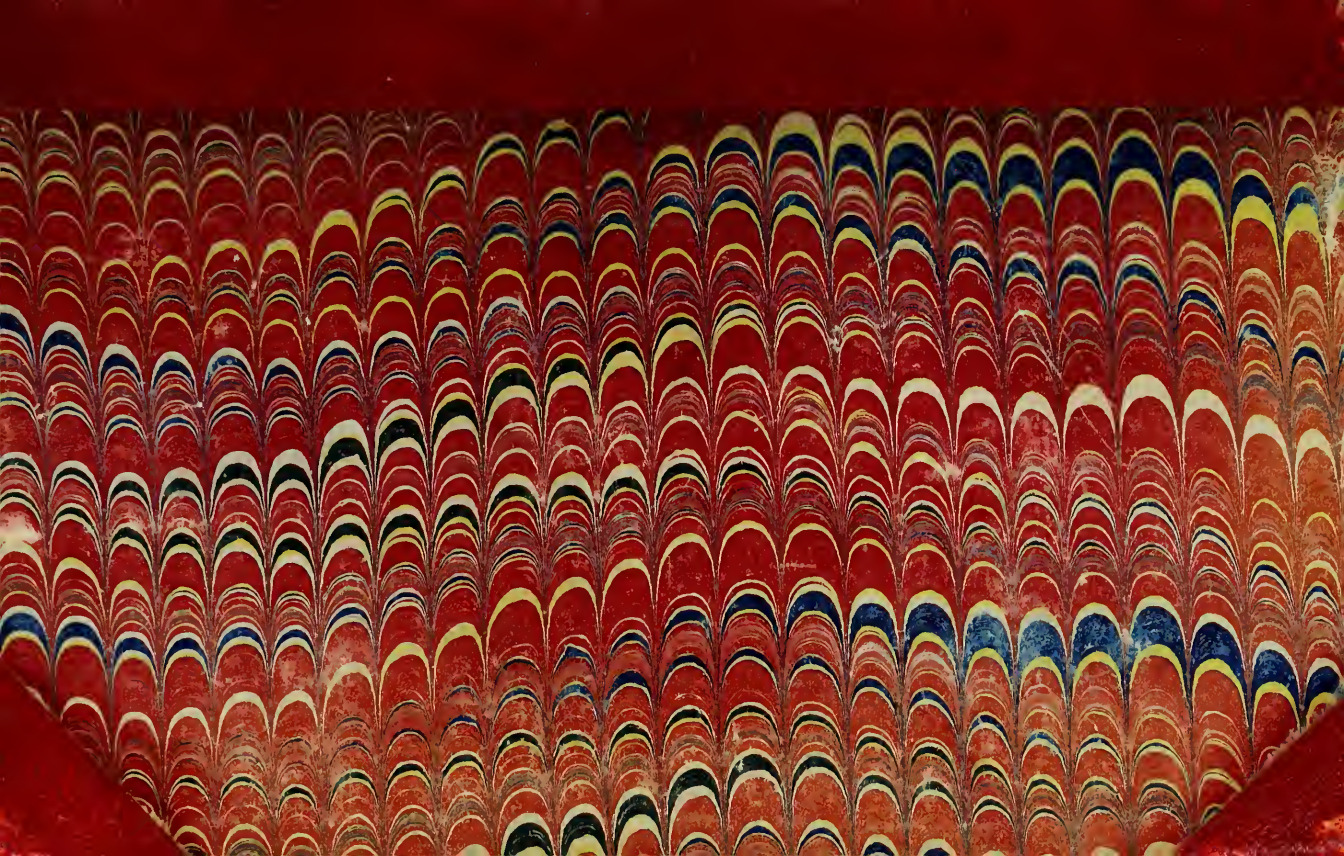

A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE

BEING THE MEMOIRS OF GASTON DE BONNE
SIEUR DE MARSAC

BY

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF"

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

AND NEW YORK: 15 EAST 16th STREET

1893

ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY PRESS.

CONTENTS.

A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT ROSNY.

The morning brought only fresh proofs of the kindness which M. de Rosny had conceived for me. Awaking early I found on a stool beside my clothes, a purse of gold containing a hundred crowns; and a youth presently entering to ask me if I lacked anything, I had at first some difficulty in recognising Simon Fleix, so sprucely was the lad dressed, in a mode resembling Maignan's. I looked at the student more than once before I addressed him by his name; and was as much surprised by the strange change I observed in him—for it was not confined to his clothes—as by anything which had happened since I entered the house. I rubbed my eyes,

and asked him what he had done with his soutane.

"Burned it, M. de Marsac," he answered briefly.

I saw that he had burned much, metaphorically speaking, besides his soutane. He was less pale, less lank, less wobegone than formerly, and went more briskly. He had lost the air of crack-brained disorder which had distinguished him, and was smart, sedate, and stooped less. Only the odd sparkle remained in his eyes, and bore witness to the same nervous, eager spirit within.

"What are you going to do, then, Simon?" I asked, noting these changes curiously.

"I am a soldier," he answered, "and follow M. de Marsac."

I laughed. "You have chosen a poor service, I am afraid," I said, beginning to rise: "and one, too, Simon, in which it is possible you may be killed. I thought that would not suit you," I continued, to see what he would say. But he answered nothing, and

I looked at him in great surprise. "You have made up your mind, then, at last?" I said.

"Perfectly," he answered.

"And solved all your doubts?"

"I have no doubts."

"You are a Huguenot?"

"That is the only true and pure religion," he replied gravely. And with apparent sincerity and devotion he repeated Beza's Confession of Faith.

This filled me with profound astonishment, but I said no more at the time, though I had my doubts. I waited until I was alone with M. de Rosny, and then I unbosomed myself on the matter; expressing my surprise at the suddenness of the conversion, and at such a man, as I had found the student to be, stating his views so firmly and steadfastly, and with so little excitement. Observing that M. de Rosny smiled but answered nothing, I explained myself farther.

"I am surprised," I said, "because I have always heard it maintained that clerkly men,

becoming lost in the mazes of theology, seldom find any sure footing; that not one in a hundred returns to his old faith, or finds grace to accept a new one. I am speaking only of such, of course, as I believe this lad to be—eager, excitable brains, learning much, and without judgment to digest what they learn."

"Of such I also believe it to be true," M. de Rosny answered, still smiling. "But even on them a little influence, applied at the right moment, has much effect, M. de Marsac."

"I allow that," I said. "But my mother, of whom I have spoken to you, saw much of this youth. His fidelity to her was beyond praise. Yet her faith, though grounded on a rock, had no weight with him."

M. de Rosny shook his head, still smiling.

"It is not our mothers who convert us," he said.

"What!" I cried, my eyes opened. "Do you mean—do you mean—that Mademoiselle has done this?"

"I fancy so," he answered, nodding. "I

think my lady cast her spell over him by the way. The lad left Blois with her, if what you say be true, without faith in the world. He came to my hands two days later the stoutest of Huguenots. It is not hard to read this riddle."

"Such conversions are seldom lasting," I said.

He looked at me queerly: and, the smile still hovering about his lips, answered, "Tush, man! Why so serious? Theodore Beza himself could not look dryer. The lad is in earnest, and there is no harm done."

And, Heaven knows, I was in no mood to suspect harm; nor inclined just then to look at the dark side of things. It may be conceived how delightful it was to me to be received as an equal and honoured guest by a man, even then famous, and now so grown in reputation as to overshadow all Frenchmen save his master; how pleasant to enjoy the comforts and amiabilities of home, from which I had been long estranged; to pour my mother's story into Madame's ears and find

comfort in her sympathy; to feel myself, in fine, once more a gentleman with an acknowledged place in the world. Our days were spent in hunting, or excursions of some kind, our evenings in long conversations, which impressed me with an ever-growing respect for my lord's powers.

For there seemed to be no end either to his knowledge of France, or to the plans for its development, which even then filled his brain, and have since turned wildernesses into fruitful lands, and squalid towns into great cities. Grave and formal, he could yet unbend; the most sagacious of counsellors, he was a soldier also, and loved the seclusion in which we lived the more that it was not devoid of danger; the neighbouring towns being devoted to the League, and the general disorder alone making it possible for him to lie unsuspected in his own house.

One thing only rendered my ease and comfort imperfect, and that was the attitude which Mademoiselle de la Vire assumed towards

me. Of her gratitude in the first blush of the thing I felt no doubt; for not only had she thanked me very prettily, though with reserve, on the evening of my arrival, but the warmth of M. de Rosny's kindness left me no choice, save to believe that she had given him an exaggerated idea of my merits and services. I asked no more than this. Such good offices left me nothing to expect or desire; my age and ill-fortune placing me at so great a disadvantage that, far from dreaming of friendship or intimacy with her, I did not even assume the equality in our daily intercourse to which my birth, taken by itself, entitled me. Knowing that I must appear in her eyes old, poor, and ill-dressed, and satisfied with having asserted my conduct and honour, I was careful not to trespass on her gratitude; and while forward in such courtesies as could not weary her, I avoided with equal care every appearance of pursuing her, or inflicting my company upon her. I addressed her formally and upon formal topics only, such, I mean, as

we shared with the rest of our company; and reminded myself often that though we now met in the same house and at the same table, she was still the Mademoiselle de la Vire who had borne herself so loftily in the King of Navarre's ante-chamber. This I did, not out of pique or wounded pride, which I no more, God knows, harboured against her than against a bird; but that I might not in my new prosperity forget the light in which such a woman, young, spoiled, and beautiful, must still regard me.

Keeping to this inoffensive posture, I was the more hurt when I found her gratitude fade with the hour. After the first two days, during which I remarked that she was very silent, seldom speaking to me or looking at me, she resumed much of her old air of disdain. For that I cared little; but she presently went further, and began to rake up the incidents which had happened at St. Jean d'Angely, and in which I had taken part. She continually adverted to my poverty while

there, to the odd figure I had cut, and the many jests her friends had made at my expense. She seemed to take a pleasure positively savage in these, gibing at me sometimes so bitterly as to shame and pain me, and bring the colour to Madame de Rosny's cheeks.

To the time we had spent together, on the other hand, she never or rarely referred. One afternoon, however, a week after my arrival at Rosny, I found her sitting alone in the parlour. I had not known she was there, and I was for withdrawing at once with a bow and a muttered apology. But she stopped me with an angry gesture. "I do not bite," she said, rising from her stool and meeting my eyes, a red spot in each cheek. "Why do you look at me like that? Do you know, M. de Marsac, that I have no patience with you." And she stamped her foot on the floor.

"But, Mademoiselle," I stammered humbly, wondering what in the world she meant, "what have I done?"

"Done?" she repeated angrily. "Done? It is not what you have done, it is what you are. I have no patience with you. Why are you so dull, sir? Why are you so dowdy? Why do you go about with your doublet awry, and your hair lank? Why do you speak to Maignan as if he were a gentleman? Why do you look always solemn and polite, and as if all the world were a prêche? Why? Why? Why, I say?"

She stopped from sheer lack of breath, leaving me as much astonished as ever in my life. She looked so beautiful in her fury and fierceness too, that I could only stare at her and wonder dumbly what it all meant.

"Well!" she cried impatiently, after bearing this as long as she could, "have you not a word to say for yourself? Have you no tongue? Have you no will of your own at all, M. de Marsac?"

"But, Mademoiselle," I began, trying to explain.

"Chut!" she exclaimed, cutting me short

before I could get farther, as the way of women is. And then she added, in a changed tone, and very abruptly, "You have a velvet knot of mine, sir. Give it me."

"It is in my room," I answered, astonished beyond measure at this sudden change of subject, and equally sudden demand.

"Then fetch it, sir, if you please," she replied, her eyes flashing afresh. "Fetch it. Fetch it, I say! It has served its turn, and I prefer to have it. Who knows but that some day you may be showing it for a love-knot?"

"Mademoiselle!" I cried, hotly. And I think that for the moment I was as angry as she was.

"Still, I prefer to have it," she answered sullenly, casting down her eyes.

I was so much enraged I went without a word and fetched it, and, bringing it to her where she stood, in the same place, put it in her hands. When she saw it some recollection, I fancy, of the day when she had traced the cry for help on it, came to her in her anger;

for she took it from me with all her bearing altered. She trembled, and held it for a moment in her hands, as if she did not know what to do with it. She was thinking, doubtless, of the house in Blois and the peril she had run there; and, being for my part quite willing that she should think and feel how badly she had acted, I stood looking at her, sparing her no whit of my glance.

"The gold chain you left on my mother's pillow," I said coldly, seeing she continued silent, "I cannot return to you at once, for I have pledged it. But I will do so as soon as I can."

"You have pledged it?" she muttered, with her eyes averted.

"Yes, Mademoiselle, to procure a horse to bring me here," I replied dryly. "However, it shall be redeemed. In return, there is something I too would ask."

"What?" she murmured, recovering herself with an effort, and looking at me with something of her old pride and defiance.

"The broken coin you have," I said. "The token, I mean. It is of no use to you, for your enemies hold the other half. It might be of service to me."

"How?" she asked curtly.

"Because some day I may find its fellow, Mademoiselle."

"And then?" she cried. She looked at me, her lips parted, her eyes flashing. "What then, when you have found its fellow, M. de Marsac?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Bah!" she exclaimed, clenching her little hand, and stamping her foot on the floor in a passion I could not understand. "That is you! That is M. de Marsac all over. You say nothing, and men think nothing of you. You go with your hat in your hand, and they tread on you. They speak, and you are silent. Why, if I could use a sword as you can, I would keep silence before no man, nor let any man save the King of France cock his hat in my presence! But you! There! go, leave

me. Here is your coin. Take it and go. Send me that lad of yours to keep me awake. At any rate he has brains, he is young, he is a man, he has a soul, he can feel—if he were anything but a clerk!"

She waved me off in such a wind of passion as might have amused me in another, but in her smacked so strongly of ingratitude as to pain me not a little. I went, however, and sent Simon to her: though I liked the errand very ill, and no better when I saw the lad's face light up at the mention of her name. But apparently she had not recovered her temper when he reached her, for he fared no better than I had done; coming away presently with the air of a whipped dog, as I saw from the yew-tree walk where I was strolling.

Still, after that she made it a habit to talk to him more and more; and, Monsieur and Madame de Rosny being much taken up with one another, there was no one to check her fancy or speak a word of advice. Knowing her pride, I had no fears for her; but it grieved

me to think that the lad's head should be turned. A dozen times I made up my mind to speak to her on his behalf; but for one thing it was not my business, and for another I soon discovered that she was aware of my displeasure, and valued it not a jot. For venturing one morning, when she was in a pleasant humour, to hint that she treated those beneath her too inhumanly, and with an unkindness as little becoming noble blood as familiarity, she asked me scornfully if I did not think she treated Simon Fleix well enough. To which I had nothing to answer.

I might here remark on the system of secret intelligence by means of which M. de Rosny, even in this remote place, received news of all that was passing in France. But it is common fame. There was no coming or going of messengers, which would quickly have aroused suspicion in the neighbouring town, nor was it possible even for me to say exactly by what channels news came. But come it did, and at all hours of the day. In this way we heard

of the danger of La Ganache and of the effort contemplated by the King of Navarre for its relief. M. de Rosny not only communicated these matters to me without reserve, but engaged my affections by further proofs of confidence such as might well have flattered a man of greater importance.

I have said that, as a rule, there was no coming or going of messengers. But one evening, returning from the chase with one of the keepers, who had prayed my assistance in hunting down a crippled doe, I was surprised to find a strange horse, which had evidently been ridden hard and far, standing smoking in the yard. Inquiring whose it was, I learned that a man believed by the grooms to be from Blois had just arrived and was closeted with the baron. An event so far out of the ordinary course of things naturally aroused my wonder; but desiring to avoid any appearance of curiosity, which, if indulged, is apt to become the most vulgar of vices, I refrained from entering the house, and repaired instead to the

yew-walk. I had scarcely, however, heated my blood, a little chilled with riding, before the page came to me to fetch me to his master.

I found M. de Rosny striding up and down his room, his manner so disordered and his face disfigured by so much grief and horror that I started on seeing him. My heart sinking in a moment, I did not need to look at Madame, who sat weeping silently in a chair, to assure myself that something dreadful had happened. The light was failing and a lamp had been brought into the room. M. de Rosny pointed abruptly to a small piece of paper which lay on the table beside it, and, obeying his gesture, I took this up and read its contents, which consisted of less than a score of words.

"He is ill and like to die," the message ran, "twenty leagues south of La Ganache. Come at all costs. P. M."

"Who?" I said stupidly—stupidly, for already I began to understand. "Who is ill and like to die?"

M. de Rosny turned to me, and I saw that the tears were trickling unbidden down his cheeks. "There is but one *he* for me," he cried. "May God spare that one! May He spare him to France, which needs him, to the Church, which hangs on him, and to me, who love him! Let him not fall in the hour of fruition. O Lord, let him not fall!" And he sank on to a stool, and remained in that posture, with his face in his hands, his broad shoulders shaken with grief.

"Come, sir," I said, after a pause sacred to sorrow and dismay; "let me remind you that while there is life there is hope."

"Hope?"

"Yes, M. de Rosny, hope," I replied more cheerfully. "He has work to do. He is elected, called, and chosen; the Joshua of his people, as M. d'Amours rightly called him. God will not take him yet. You shall see him and be embraced by him, as has happened a hundred times. Remember, sir, the King of Navarre is strong, hardy, and young, and no doubt in good hands."

"Mornay's!" M. de Rosny cried, looking up with contempt in his eye.

Yet from that moment he rallied, spurred, I think, by the thought that the King of Navarre's recovery depended under God on M. de Mornay, whom he was ever inclined to regard as his rival. He began to make instant preparations for departure from Rosny, and bade me do so also, telling me, somewhat curtly and without explanation, that he had need of me. The danger of so speedy a return to the South, where the full weight of the Vicomte de Turenne's vengeance awaited me, occurred to me strongly; and I ventured, though with a little shame, to mention it. But M. de Rosny, after gazing at me a moment in apparent doubt, put the objection aside with a degree of peevishness unusual in him, and continued to press on his arrangements as earnestly as though they did not include separation from a wife equally loving and beloved.

Having few things to look to myself, I was

at leisure, when the hour of departure came, to observe both the courage with which Madame de Rosny supported her sorrow, "for the sake of France," and the unwonted tenderness which Mademioselle de la Vire, lifted for once above herself, lavished on her. I seemed to stand,—happily in one light, and yet the feeling was fraught with pain,—outside their familiar relations; yet, having made my adieux as short and formal as possible, that I might not encroach on other and more sacred ones, I found at the last moment something in waiting for me. I was surprised as I rode under the gateway a little ahead of the others, by something small and light falling on the saddle-bow before me. Catching it before it could slide to the ground, I saw, with infinite astonishment, that I held in my hand a tiny velvet bow.

To look up at the window of the parlour, which I have said was over the archway was my first impulse. I did so, and met Made-

moiselle's eyes for a second, and a second only. The next moment she was gone. M. de Rosny clattered through the gate at my heels, the servants behind him. And we were on the road

CHAPTER XIV.

M. DE RAMBOUILLET.

For a while we were but a melancholy party. The incident I have last related—which seemed to admit of more explanations than one—left me in a state of the greatest perplexity; and this prevailed with me for a time, and was only dissipated at length by my seeing my own face, as it were, in a glass. For, chancing presently to look behind me, I observed that Simon Fleix was riding, notwithstanding his fine hat and feather and his new sword, in a posture and with an air of dejection difficult to exaggerate; whereon the reflection that master and man had the same object in their minds—nay, the thought that possibly he bore in his bosom a like token to that which lay warm in mine—occurring to me, I roused myself as from some degrading

dream, and, shaking up the Cid, cantered forward to join Rosny, who, in no cheerful mood himself, was riding steadily forward, wrapped to his eyes in his cloak.

The news of the King of Navarre's illness had fallen on him, indeed, in the midst of his sanguine scheming with the force of a thunderbolt. He saw himself in danger of losing at once the master he loved and the brilliant future to which he looked forward; and amid the imminent crash of his hopes and the destruction of the system in which he lived, he had scarcely time to regret the wife he was leaving at Rosny or the quiet from which he was so suddenly called. His heart was in the South, at La Ganache, by Henry's couch. His main idea was to get there quickly at all risks. The name of the King of Navarre's physician was constantly on his lips. "Dortoman is a good man. If anyone can save him, Dortoman will," was his perpetual cry. And whenever we met anyone who had the least appearance of bearing news, he would have

me stop and interrogate him, and by no means let the traveller go until he had given us the last rumour from Blois—the channel through which all the news from the South reached us.

An incident which occurred at the inn that evening cheered him somewhat; the most powerful minds being prone, I have observed, to snatch at omens in times of uncertainty. An elderly man, of strange appearance, and dressed in an affected and bizarre fashion, was seated at table when we arrived. Though I entered first in my assumed capacity of leader of the party, he let me pass before him without comment, but rose and solemnly saluted M. de Rosny, albeit the latter walked behind me and was much more plainly dressed. Rosny returned his greeting, and would have passed on; but the stranger, interposing with a still lower bow, invited him to take his seat, which was near the fire and sheltered from the draught, at the same time making as if he would himself remove to another place.

"Nay," said my companion, surprised by such an excess of courtesy, "I do not see why I should take your place, sir."

"Not mine only," the old man rejoined, looking at him with a particularity and speaking with an emphasis which attracted our attention, "but those of many others, who I can assure you will very shortly yield them up to you, whether they will or not."

M. de Rosny shrugged his shoulders and passed on, affecting to suppose the old man wandered. But privately he thought much of his words, and more when he learned that he was an astrologer from Paris, who had the name, at any rate in this country, of having studied under Nostradamus. And whether he drew fresh hopes from this, or turned his attention more particularly as we approached Blois to present matters, certainly he grew more cheerful, and began again to discuss the future, as though assured of his master's recovery.

"You have never been to the King's Court?"

he said presently, following up, as I judged, a train of thought in his own mind. "At Blois, I mean."

"No; nor do I feel anxious to visit it," I answered. "To tell you the truth, M. le Baron," I continued with some warmth, "the sooner we are beyond Blois, the better I shall be pleased. I think we run some risk there, and, besides, I do not fancy a shambles. I do not think I could see the king without thinking of the Bartholomew, nor his chamber without thinking of Guise."

"Tut, tut!" he said, "you have killed a man before now."

"Many," I answered.

"Do they trouble you?"

"No, but they were killed in fair fight," I replied. "That makes a difference."

"To you," he said drily. "But you are not the King of France, you see. Should you ever come across him," he continued, flicking his horse's ears, a faint smile on his lips, "I will give you a hint. Talk to him of the battles

at Jarnac and Moncontour, and praise your Condé's father! As Condé lost the fight and he won it, the compliment comes home to him. The more hopelessly a man has lost his powers, my friend, the more fondly he regards them, and the more highly he prizes the victories he can no longer gain."

"Ugh!" I muttered.

"Of the two parties at Court," Rosny continued, calmly overlooking my ill-humour, "trust D'Aumont and Biron and the French clique. They are true to France at any rate. But whomsoever you see consort with the two Retzs—the King of Spain's jackals, as men name them— avoid him for a Spaniard and a traitor."

"But the Retzs are Italians," I objected peevishly.

"The same thing," he answered curtly. "They cry, 'Vive le Roi!' but privately they are for the League or for Spain, or for whatever may most hurt us: who are better Frenchmen than themselves, and whose leader

will some day, if God spare his life, be King of France."

"Well, the less I have to do with the one or the other of them, save at the sword's point, the better I shall be pleased," I rejoined.

On that he looked at me with a queer smile; as was his way when he had more in his mind than appeared. And this, and something special in the tone of his conversation, as well, perhaps, as my own doubts about my future and his intentions regarding me, gave me an uneasy feeling; which lasted through the day, and left me only when more immediate peril presently rose to threaten us.

It happened in this way. We had reached the outskirts of Blois, and were just approaching the gate, hoping to pass through without attracting attention, when two travellers rode slowly out of a lane, the mouth of which we were passing. They eyed us closely as they reined in to let us go by; and M. de Rosny, who was riding with his horse's head at my stirrup, whispered me to press on. Before I

could comply, however, the strangers cantered by us, and turning in the saddle when abreast of us looked us in the face. A moment later one of them cried loudly, "It is he!" and both pulled their horses across the road, and waited for us to come up.

Aware that if M. de Rosny were discovered he would be happy if he escaped with imprisonment, the king being too jealous of his Catholic reputation to venture to protect a Huguenot, however illustrious, I saw that the situation was desperate; for, though we were five to two, the neighbourhood of the city—the gate being scarcely a bow-shot off—rendered flight or resistance equally hopeless. I could think of nothing for it save to put a bold face on the matter; and, M. de Rosny doing the same, we advanced in the most innocent way possible.

"Halt there!" cried one of the strangers sharply. "And let me tell you, sir, you are known."

"What if I am?" I answered impatiently,

still pressing on. "Are you highwaymen, that you stop the way?"

The speaker on the other side looked at me keenly, but in a moment retorted, "Enough trifling, sir! Who *you* are I do not know. But the person riding at your rein is M. de Rosny. Him I do know, and I warn him to stop."

I thought the game was lost; but to my surprise my companion answered at once and almost in the same words I had used. "Well, sir, and what of that?" he said.

"What of that?" the stranger exclaimed, spurring his horse so as still to bar the way. "Why, only this, that you must be a madman to show yourself on this side of the Loire."

"It is long since I have seen the other," was my companion's unmoved answer.

"You are M. de Rosny? You do not deny it?" the man cried in astonishment.

"Certainly I do not deny it," M. de Rosny answered bluntly. "And more, the day has been, sir," he continued with sudden fire,

"when few at his Majesty's Court would have dared to chop words with Solomon de Bethune, much less to stop him on the highway within a mile of the Palace. But times are changed with me, sir, and it would seem with others also, if true men rallying to his Majesty in his need are to be challenged by every passer on the road."

"What! Are you Solomon de Bethune?" the man cried incredulously. Incredulously, but his countenance fell, and his voice was full of chagrin and disappointment.

"Who else, sir?" M. de Rosny replied haughtily. "I am; and, as far as I know, I have as much right on this side of the Loire as any other man."

"A thousand pardons."

"If you are not satisfied ——"

"Nay, M. de Rosny, I am perfectly satisfied."

The stranger repeated this with a very crestfallen air, adding, "A thousand pardons"; and fell to making other apologies, doffing his

hat with great respect. "I took you, if you will pardon me saying so, for your Huguenot brother, M. Maximilian," he explained. "The saying goes that he is at Rosny."

"I can answer for that being false," M. de Rosny answered peremptorily; "for I have just come from there, and I will answer for it he is not within ten leagues of the place. And now, sir, as we desire to enter before the gates shut, perhaps you will excuse us." With which he bowed, and I bowed, and they bowed, and we separated. They gave us the road, which M. de Rosny took with a great air, and we trotted to the gate, and passed through it without misadventure.

The first street we entered was a wide one, and my companion took advantage of this to ride up abreast of me. "That is the kind of adventure our little prince is fond of," he muttered. "But for my part, M. de Marsac, the sweat is running down my forehead. I have played the trick more than once before, for my brother and I are as like as two peas.

And yet it would have gone ill with us if the fool had been one of his friends."

"All's well that ends well," I answered in a low voice, thinking it an ill time for compliments. As it was, the remark was unfortunate, for M. de Rosny was still in the act of reining back when Maignan called out to us to say we were being followed.

I looked behind, but could see nothing except gloom and rain and overhanging eaves and a few figures cowering in doorways. The servants, however, continued to maintain that it was so; and we held, without actually stopping, a council of war. If detected, we were caught in a trap, without hope of escape; and for the moment I was sure M. de Rosny regretted that he had chosen this route by Blois—that he had thrust himself, in his haste and his desire to take with him the latest news, into a snare so patent. The Castle—huge, dark, and grim—loomed before us at the end of the street in which we were, and, chilled as I was myself by the sight, I could

imagine how much more appalling it must appear to him, the chosen counsellor of his master, and the steadfast opponent of all which it represented.

Our consultation came to nothing, for no better course suggested itself than to go as we had intended to the lodgings commonly used by my companion. We did so, looking behind us often, and saying more than once that Maignan must be mistaken. As soon as we had dismounted, however, and gone in, he showed us from the window a man loitering near; and this confirmation of our alarm sending us to our expedients again, while Maignan remained watching in a room without a light, I suggested that I might pass myself off, though ten years older, for my companion.

"Alas!" he said, drumming with his fingers on the table, "there are too many here who know me to make that possible. I thank you all the same."

"Could you escape on foot? Or pass the

wall anywhere, or slip through the gates early?" I suggested.

"They might tell us at the 'Bleeding Heart,'" he answered. "But I doubt it. I was a fool, sir, to put my neck into Mendoza's halter, and that is a fact. But here is Maignan. What is it, man?" he continued eagerly.

"The watcher is gone, my lord," the equerry answered.

"And has left no one?"

"No one that I can see."

We both went into the next room and looked from the windows. The man was certainly not where we had seen him before. But the rain was falling heavily, the eaves were dripping, the street was a dark cavern, with only here and there a spark of light, and the fellow might be lurking elsewhere. Maignan, being questioned, however, believed he had gone off of set purpose.

"Which may be read half a dozen ways," I remarked.

"At any rate, we are fasting," M. de Rosny

answered. "Give me a full man in a fight. Let us sit down and eat. It is no good jumping in the dark, or meeting troubles half way."

We were not through our meal, however, Simon Fleix waiting on us with a pale face, when Maignan came in again from the dark room. "My lord," he said quietly, "three men have appeared. Two of them remain twenty paces away. The third has come to the door."

As he spoke we heard a cautious summons below. Maignan was for going down, but his master bade him stand. "Let the woman of the house go," he said.

I remarked and long remembered M. de Rosny's *sangfroid* on this occasion. His pistols he had already laid on a chair beside him, throwing his cloak over them; and now, while we waited, listening in breathless silence, I saw him hand a large slice of bread and meat to his equerry, who, standing behind his chair, began eating it with the same coolness.

Simon Fleix, on the other hand, stood gazing at the door, trembling in every limb, and with so much of excitement and surprise in his attitude that I took the precaution of bidding him, in a low voice, do nothing without orders. At the same moment it occurred to me to extinguish two of the four candles which had been lighted; and I did so, M. de Rosny nodding assent, just as the muttered conversation which was being carried on below ceased, and a man's tread sounded on the stairs.

It was followed immediately by a knock on the outside of our door. Obeying my companion's look, I cried, "Enter!"

A slender man of middle height, booted and wrapped up, with his face almost entirely hidden by a fold of his cloak, came in quickly, and, closing the door behind him, advanced towards the table. "Which is M. de Rosny?" he said.

Rosny had carefully turned his face from the light, but at the sound of the other's voice

he sprang up with a cry of relief. He was about to speak, when the new-comer, raising his hand peremptorily, continued, "No names, I beg. Yours, I suppose, is known here. Mine is not, nor do I desire it should be. I want speech of you, that is all."

"I am greatly honoured," M. de Rosny replied, gazing at him eagerly. "Yet, who told you I was here?"

"I saw you pass under a lamp in the street," the stranger answered. "I knew your horse first, and you afterwards, and bade a groom follow you. Believe me," he added, with a gesture of the hand, "you have nothing to fear from me."

"I accept the assurance in the spirit in which it is offered," my companion answered with a graceful bow, "and think myself fortunate in being recognised"—he paused a moment and then continued—"by a Frenchman and a man of honour."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. "Your pardon, then," he said, "if I seem abrupt.

My time is short. I want to do the best with it I can. Will you favour me?"

I was for withdrawing, but M. de Rosny ordered Maignan to place lights in the next room, and, apologising to me very graciously, retired thither with the stranger, leaving me relieved indeed by these peaceful appearances, but full of wonder and conjectures who this might be, and what the visit portended. At one moment I was inclined to identify the stranger with M. de Rosny's brother; at another with the English ambassador; and then, again, a wild idea that he might be M. de Bruhl occurred to me. The two remained together about a quarter of an hour, and then came out, the stranger leading the way, and saluting me politely as he passed through the room. At the door he turned to say, "At nine o' clock, then?"

"At nine o'clock," M. de Rosny replied, holding the door open. "You will excuse me if I do not descend, Marquis?"

"Yes, go back, my friend," the stranger

answered. And, lighted by Maignan, whose face on such occasions could assume the most stolid air in the world, he disappeared down the stairs, and I heard him go out.

M. de Rosny turned to me, his eyes sparkling with joy, his face and mien full of animation. "The King of Navarre is better," he said. "He is said to be out of danger. What do you think of that, my friend?"

"That is the best news I have heard for many a day," I answered. And I hastened to add, that France and the Religion had reason to thank God for His mercy.

"Amen to that," my patron replied reverently. "But that is not all—that is not all." And he began to walk up and down the room humming the 118th Psalm a little above his breath—

> La voici l'heureuse journée
> Que Dieu a faite à plein désir;
> Par nous soit joie démenée,
> Et prenons en elle plaisir.

He continued, indeed, to walk up and down

the floor so long, and with so joyful a countenance and demeanour, that I ventured at last to remind him of my presence, which he had clearly forgotten. "Ha! to be sure," he said, stopping short and looking at me with the utmost good-humour. "What time is it? Seven. Then until nine o' clock, my friend, I crave your indulgence. In fine, until that time I must keep counsel. Come, I am hungry still. Let us sit down, and this time I hope we may not be interrupted. Simon, set us on a fresh bottle. Ha! ha! *Vivent le Roi et le Roi de Navarre!*" And again he fell to humming the same psalm—

O Dieu éternel, je te prie,
Je te prie, ton roi maintiens:
O Dieu, je te prie et reprie,
Sauve ton roi et l'entretiens!

doing so with a light in his eyes and a joyous emphasis, which impressed me the more in a man ordinarily so calm and self-contained. I saw that something had occurred to gratify him beyond measure, and, believing his state-

ment that this was not the good news from La Ganache only, I waited with the utmost interest and anxiety for the hour of nine, which had no sooner struck than our former visitor appeared with the same air of mystery and disguise which had attended him before.

M. de Rosny, who had risen on hearing his step and had taken up his cloak, paused with it half on and half off, to cry anxiously, "All is well, is it not?"

"Perfectly," the stranger replied, with a nod.

"And my friend?"

"Yes, on condition that you answer for his discretion and fidelity." And the stranger glanced involuntarily at me, who stood uncertain whether to hold my ground or retire.

"Good," M. de Rosny cried. Then he turned to me with a mingled air of dignity and kindness, and continued: "This is the gentleman. M. de Marsac, I am honoured with permission to present you to the Marquis de Rambouillet, whose interest and protection

I beg you to deserve, for he is a true Frenchman and a patriot whom I respect."

M. de Rambouillet saluted me politely. "Of a Brittany family, I think?" he said.

I assented; and he replied with something complimentary. But afterwards he continued to look at me in silence with a keenness and curiosity I did not understand. At last, when M. de Rosny's impatience had reached a high pitch, the marquis seemed impelled to add something. "You quite understand, M. de Rosny?" he said. "Without saying any thing disparaging of M. de Marsac, who is, no doubt, a man of honour"—and he bowed to me very low—"this is a delicate matter, and you will introduce no one into it, I am sure, whom you cannot trust as yourself."

"Precisely," M. de Rosny replied, speaking drily, yet with a grand air which fully matched his companion's. "I am prepared to trust this gentleman not only with my life but with my honour."

"Nothing more remains to be said then,"

the marquis rejoined, bowing to me again. "I am glad to have been the occasion of a declaration so flattering to you, sir."

I returned his salute in silence, and obeying M. de Rosny's muttered direction put on my cloak and sword. M. de Rosny took up his pistols.

"You will have no need of these," the marquis said with a high glance.

"Where we are going, no," my companion answered, calmly continuing to dispose them about him. "But the streets are dark and not too safe."

M. de Rambouillet laughed. "That is the worst of you Huguenots," he said. "You never know when to lay suspicion aside."

A hundred retorts sprang to my lips. I thought of the Bartholomew, of the French fury of Antwerp, of half-a-dozen things which make my blood boil to this day. But M. de Rosny's answer was the finest of all. "That is true, I am afraid," he said quietly. "On the other hand, you Catholics—take the late

M. de Guise, for instance—have the habit of erring on the other side, I think, and sometimes trust too far."

The marquis, without making any answer to this home-thrust, led the way out, and we followed, being joined at the door of the house by a couple of armed lackeys, who fell in behind us. We went on foot. The night was dark, and the prospect out of doors was not cheering. The streets were wet and dirty, and notwithstanding all our care we fell continually into pitfalls or over unseen obstacles. Crossing the *parvis* of the cathedral, which I remembered, we plunged in silence into an obscure street near the river, and so narrow that the decrepit houses shut out almost all view of the sky. The gloom of our surroundings, no less than my ignorance of the errand on which we were bound, filled me with anxiety and foreboding. My companions keeping strict silence, however, and taking every precaution to avoid being recognised, I had no choice but to do likewise.

I could think, and no more. I felt myself borne along by an irresistible current, whither and for what purpose I could not tell; and experienced to an extent strange at my age the influence of the night and the weather. Twice we stood aside to let a party of roisterers go by, and the excessive care M. de Rambouillet evinced on these occasions to avoid recognition did not tend to reassure me or make me think more lightly of the unknown business on which I was bound.

Reaching at last an open space, our leader bade us in a low voice be careful and follow him closely. We did so, and crossed in this way and in single file a narrow plank or wooden bridge; but whether water ran below or a dry ditch only, I could not determine. My mind was taken up at the moment with the discovery which I had just made, that the dark building, looming huge and black before us with a single light twinkling here and there at great heights, was the Castle of Blois.

CHAPTER XV.

VILAIN HERODES.

All the distaste and misliking I had expressed earlier in the day for the Court of Blois recurred with fresh force in the darkness and gloom; and though, booted and travel-stained as we were, I did not conceive it likely that we should be obtruded on the circle about the king, I felt none the less an oppressive desire to be through with our adventure, and away from the ill-omened precincts in which I found myself. The darkness prevented me seeing the faces of my companions; but on M. de Rosny, who was not quite free himself, I think, from the influences of the time and place, twitching my sleeve to enforce vigilance, I noted that the lackeys had ceased to follow us, and that we three were beginning to ascend a rough staircase cut in the rock.

I gathered, though the darkness limited my view behind as well as in front to a few twinkling lights, that we were mounting the scarp from the moat to the side wall of the Castle; and I was not surprised when the marquis muttered to us to stop, and knocked softly on the wood of a door.

M. de Rosny might have spared the touch he had laid on my sleeve, for by this time I was fully and painfully sensible of the critical position in which we stood, and was very little likely to commit an indiscretion. I trusted he had not done so already! No doubt—it flashed across me while we waited—he had taken care to safeguard himself. But how often, I reflected, had all safeguards been set aside and all precautions eluded by those to whom he was committing himself! Guise had thought himself secure in this very building, which we were about to enter. Coligny had received the most absolute of safe-conducts from those to whom we were apparently bound. The end in either case had been the

same, the confidence of the one proving of no more avail than the wisdom of the other. What if the King of France thought to make his peace with his Catholic subjects—offended by the murder of Guise—by a second murder of one as obnoxious to them as he was precious to their arch-enemy in the South? Rosny was sagacious indeed; but then I reflected with a sudden misgiving that he was young, ambitious, and bold.

The opening of the door interrupted without putting an end to this train of apprehension. A faint light shone out; so feebly as to illumine little more than the stairs at our feet. The marquis entered at once, M. de Rosny followed, I brought up the rear; and the door was closed by a man who stood behind it. We found ourselves crowded together at the foot of a very narrow staircase, which the doorkeeper—a stolid pikeman in a grey uniform, with a small lantern swinging from the cross piece of his halberd—signed to us to ascend. I said a word to him, but

he only stared in answer, and M. de Rambouillet, looking back and seeing what I was about, called to me that it was useless, as the man was a Swiss and spoke no French.

This did not tend to reassure me; any more than did the chill roughness of the wall which my hand touched as I groped upwards or the smell of bats which invaded my nostrils and suggested that the staircase was little used, and belonged to a part of the Castle fitted for dark and secret doings.

We stumbled in the blackness up the steps, passing one door and then a second before M. de Rambouillet whispered to us to stand, and knocked gently at a third.

The secrecy, the darkness, and above all the strange arrangements made to receive us, filled me with the wildest conjectures. But when the door opened and we passed one by one into a bare, unfurnished, draughty gallery, immediately, as I judged, under the tiles, the reality agreed with no one of my anticipations. The place was a mere garret, without a hearth,

without a single stool. Three windows, of which one was roughly glazed, while the others were filled with oiled paper, were set in one wall; the others displaying the stones and mortar without disguise or ornament. Beside the door through which we had entered stood a silent figure in the grey uniform I had seen below, his lantern on the floor at his feet. A second door at the farther end of the gallery, which was full twenty paces long, was guarded in like manner. A couple of lanterns stood in the middle of the floor, and that was all.

Inside the door, M. de Rambouillet with his finger on his lip stopped us, and we stood a little group of three a pace in front of the sentry, and with the empty room before us. I looked at M. de Rosny, but he was looking at Rambouillet. The marquis had his back towards me, the sentry was gazing into vacancy; so that, baffled in my attempt to learn anything from the looks of the other actors in the scene, I fell back on my ears.

The rain dripped outside and the moaning wind rattled the casements; but mingled with these melancholy sounds—which gained force, as such things always do, from the circumstances in which we were placed and our own silence—I fancied I caught the distant hum of voices and music and laughter. And that, I know not why, brought M. de Guise again to my mind.

The story of his death, as I had heard it from that accursed monk in the inn on the Claine, rose up in all its freshness, with all its details. I started when M. de Rambouillet coughed. I shivered when Rosny shifted his feet. The silence grew oppressive. Only the stolid men in grey seemed unmoved, unexpectant; so that I remember wondering whether it was their nightly duty to keep guard over an empty garret, the floor strewn with scraps of mortar and ends of tiles.

The interruption, when it came at last, came suddenly. The sentry at the farther end of the gallery started and fell back a pace.

Instantly the door beside him opened and a man came in, and closing it quickly behind him, advanced up the room with an air of dignity, which even his strange appearance and attire could not wholly destroy.

He was of good stature and bearing, about forty years old as I judged, his wear a dress of violet velvet with black points cut in the extreme of the fashion. He carried a sword but no ruff, and had a cup and ball of ivory—a strange toy much in vogue among the idle—suspended from his wrist by a ribbon. He was lean and somewhat narrow, but so far I found little fault with him. It was only when my eye reached his face, and saw it rouged like a woman's and surmounted by a little turban, that a feeling of scarcely understood disgust seized me, and I said to myself, "This is the stuff of which kings' minions are made!"

To my surprise, however, M. de Rambouillet went to meet him with the utmost respect, sweeping the dirty floor with his bonnet, and

bowing to the very ground. The new-comer acknowledged his salute with negligent kindness. Remarking pleasantly, "You have brought a friend, I think?" he looked towards us with a smile.

"Yes, sire, he is here," the marquis answered, stepping aside a little. And with the word I understood that this was no minion, but the king himself: Henry, the Third of the name, and the last of the great House of Valois, which had ruled France by the grace of God for two centuries and a half! I stared at him, and stared at him, scarcely believing what I saw. For the first time in my life I was in the presence of the king!

Meanwhile M. de Rosny, to whom he was, of course, no marvel, had gone forward and knelt on one knee. The king raised him graciously, and with an action which, viewed apart from his woman's face and silly turban, seemed royal and fitting. "This is good of you, Rosny," he said. "But it is only what I expected of you."

"Sire," my companion answered, "your Majesty has no more devoted servant than myself, unless it be the king my master."

"By my faith," Henry answered with energy —"and if I am not a good churchman, whatever those rascally Parisians say, I am nothing —by my faith, I think I believe you!"

"If your Majesty would believe me in that and in some other things also," M. de Rosny answered, "it would be very well for France." Though he spoke courteously, he threw so much weight and independence into his words that I thought of the old proverb, "A good master, a bold servant".

"Well, that is what we are here to see," the king replied. "But one tells me one thing," he went on fretfully, "and one another, and which am I to believe?"

"I know nothing of others, sire," Rosny answered with the same spirit. "But my master has every claim to be believed. His interest in the royalty of France is second only to your Majesty's. He is also a king

and a kinsman, and it irks him to see rebels beard you, as has happened of late."

"Ay, but the chief of them?" Henry exclaimed, giving way to sudden excitement and stamping furiously on the floor. "He will trouble me no more. Has my brother heard of *that*? Tell me, sir, has that news reached him?"

"He has heard it, sire."

"And he approved? He approved of course?"

"Beyond doubt the man was a traitor," M. de Rosny answered delicately. "His life was forfeit, sire. Who can question it?"

"And he has paid the forfeit," the king rejoined, looking down at the floor and immediately falling into a moodiness, as sudden as his excitement. His lips moved. He muttered something inaudible, and began to play absently with his cup and ball, his mind occupied apparently with a gloomy retrospect. "M. de Guise, M. de Guise," he murmured at at last, with a sneer and an accent of hate which told of old humiliations long remembered.

"Well, damn him, he is dead now. He is dead. But being dead he yet troubles us. Is not that the verse, father? Ha!" with a start, "I was forgetting. But that is the worst wrong he has done me," he continued, looking up and growing excited again. "He has cut me off from Mother Church. There is hardly a priest comes near me now, and presently they will excommunicate me. And, as I hope for salvation, the Church has no more faithful son than I."

I believe he was on the point, forgetting M. de Rosny's presence there and his errand, of giving way to unmanly tears, when M. de Rambouillet, as if by accident, let the heel of his scabbard fall heavily on the floor. The king started, and passing his hand once or twice across his brow, seemed to recover himself. "Well," he said, "no doubt we shall find a way out of our difficulties."

"If your Majesty," Rosny answered respectfully, "would accept the aid my master

proffers, I venture to think they would vanish the quicker."

"You think so," Henry rejoined. "Well, give me your shoulder. Let us walk a little." And, signing to Rambouillet to leave him, he began to walk up and down with M. de Rosny, talking familiarly with him in an undertone. Only such scraps of the conversation as fell from them when they turned at my end of the gallery now reached me. Patching these together, however, I managed to understand somewhat. At one turn I heard the king say, "But then Turenne offers ——" At the next, "Trust him? Well, I do not know why I should not. He promises ——" Then, "A Republic, Rosny? That his plan? Pooh! he dare not. He could not. France is a kingdom by the ordinance of God in my family."

I gathered from these and other chance words, which I have since forgotten, that M. de Rosny was pressing the king to accept the help of the King of Navarre, and warning

him against the insidious offers of the Vicomte de Turenne. The mention of a Republic, however, seemed to excite his Majesty's wrath rather against Rosny for presuming to refer to such a thing than against Turenne, to whom he refused to credit it. He paused near my end of the promenade.

"Prove it!" he said angrily. "But can you prove it? Can you prove it? Mind you, I will take no hearsay evidence, sir. Now, there is Turenne's agent here—you did not know, I dare say, that he had an agent here?"

"You refer, sire, to M. de Bruhl," Rosny answered, without hesitation. "I know him, sire."

"I think you are the devil," Henry answered, looking curiously at him. "You seem to know most things. But mind you, my friend, he speaks me fairly, and I will not take this on hearsay even from your master. Though," he added after pausing a moment, "I love him."

"And he, your Majesty. He desires only to prove it."

"Yes, I know, I know," the king answered fretfully. "I believe he does. I believe he does wish me well. But there will be a devil of an outcry among my people. And Turenne gives fair words too. And I do not know," he continued, fidgeting with his cup and ball, "that it might not suit me better to agree with him, you see."

I saw M. de Rosny draw himself up. "Dare I speak openly to you, sire?" he said, with less respect and more energy than he had hitherto used. "As I should to my master?"

"Ay, say what you like," Henry answered. But he spoke sullenly, and it seemed to me that he looked less pleasantly at his companion.

"Then I will venture to utter what is in your Majesty's mind," my patron answered steadfastly. "You fear, sire, lest, having accepted my master's offer and conquered

your enemies, you should not be easily rid of him."

Henry looked relieved. "Do you call that diplomacy?" he said with a smile. "However, what if it be so? What do you say to it? Methinks I have heard an idle tale about a horse which would hunt a stag, and for the purpose set a man upon its back."

"This I say, sire, first," Rosny answered very earnestly. "That the King of Navarre is popular only with one-third of the kingdom, and is only powerful when united with you. Secondly, sire, it is his interest to support the royal power, to which he is heir. And, thirdly, it must be more to your Majesty's honour to accept help from a near kinsman than from an ordinary subject, and one who, I still maintain, sire, has no good designs in his mind."

"The proof?" Henry said sharply. "Give me that!"

"I can give it in a week from this day."

"It must be no idle tale, mind you," the king continued suspiciously.

"You shall have Turenne's designs, sire, from one who had them from his own mouth."

The king looked startled, but after a pause turned and resumed his walk. "Well," he said, "if you do that, I on my part ——"

The rest I lost, for the two passing to the farther end of the gallery, came to a standstill there, balking my curiosity and Rambouillet's also. The marquis, indeed, began to betray his impatience, and the great clock immediately over our heads presently striking the half-hour after ten, he started and made as if he would have approached the king. He checked the impulse, however, but still continued to fidget uneasily, losing his reserve by-and-by so far as to whisper to me that his Majesty would be missed.

I had been, up to this point, a silent and inactive spectator of a scene which appealed to my keenest interests and aroused my most ardent curiosity. Surprise following surprise, I had begun to doubt my own identity; so little had I expected to find myself in the presence

of the Most Christian King—and that under circumstances as strange and bizarre as could well be imagined—and then an authorised witness at a negotiation upon which the future of all the great land of France stretching for so many hundred leagues on every side of us, depended. I say I could scarcely believe in my own identity; or that I was the same Gaston de Marsac who had slunk, shabby and out-at-elbows, about St. Jean d'Angely. I tasted the first sweetness of secret power, which men say is the sweetest of all and the last relinquished; and, the hum of distant voices and laughter still reaching me at intervals, I began to understand why we had been admitted with so much precaution, and to comprehend the gratification of M. de Rosny when the promise of this interview first presented to him the hope of effecting so much for his master and for France.

Now I was to be drawn into the whirlpool itself. I was still travelling back over the different stages of the adventure which had

brought me to this point, when I was rudely awakened by M. de Rosny calling my name in a raised voice. Seeing, somewhat late, that he was beckoning to me to approach, I went forward in a confused and hasty fashion; kneeling before the king as I had seen him kneel, and then rising to give ear to his Majesty's commands. Albeit, having expected nothing less than to be called upon, I was not in the clearest mood to receive them. Nor was my bearing such as I could have wished it to be.

"M. de Rosny tells me that you desire a commission at Court, sir," the king said quickly.

"I, sire?" I stammered, scarcely able to believe my ears. I was so completely taken aback that I could say no more, and I stopped there with my mouth open.

"There are few things I can deny M. de Rosny," Henry continued, speaking very rapidly; "and I am told you are a gentleman of birth and ability. Out of kindness to him, therefore, I grant you a commission to raise

twenty men for my service. Rambouillet," he continued, raising his voice slightly, "you will introduce this gentleman to me publicly to-morrow, that I may carry into effect my intention on his behalf. You may go now, sir. No thanks. And M. de Rosny," he added, turning to my companion and speaking with energy, "have a care for my sake that you are not recognised as you go. Rambouillet must contrive something to enable you to leave without peril. I should be desolated if anything happened to you, my friend, for I could not protect you. I give you my word if Mendoza or Retz found you in Blois I could not save you from them unless you recanted."

"I will not trouble either your Majesty or my conscience," M. de Rosny replied, bowing low, "if my wits can help me."

"Well, the saints keep you!" the king answered piously, going towards the door by which he had entered; "for your master and I have both need of you. Rambouillet, take care of him as you love me. And come early in

the morning to my closet and tell me how it has fared with him."

We all stood bowing while he withdrew, and only turned to retire when the door closed behind him. Burning with indignation and chagrin as I was at finding myself disposed of in the way I have described, and pitchforked, whether I would or no, into a service I neither fancied nor desired, I still managed for the present to restrain myself; and, permitting my companions to precede me, followed in silence, listening sullenly to their jubilations. The marquis seemed scarcely less pleased than M. de Rosny; and as the latter evinced a strong desire to lessen any jealousy the former might feel, and a generous inclination to attribute to him a full share of the credit gained, I remained the only person dissatisfied with the evening's events. We retired from the château with the same precautions which had marked our entrance, and parting with M. de Rambouillet at the door of our lodging—not without many protestations of esteem on

his part and of gratitude on that of M. de Rosny—mounted to the first-floor in single file and in silence, which I was determined not to be the first to break.

Doubtless M. de Rosny knew my thoughts, for, speedily dismissing Maignan and Simon, who were in waiting, he turned to me without preface. "Come, my friend," he said, laying his hand on my shoulder and looking me in the face in a way which all but disarmed me at once, "do not let us misunderstand one another. You think you have cause to be angry with me. I cannot suffer that, for the King of Navarre had never greater need of your services than now."

"You have played me an unworthy trick, sir," I answered, thinking he would cozen me with fair speeches.

"Tut, tut!" he replied. "You do not understand."

"I understand well enough," I answered, with bitterness, "that, having done the King of Navarre's work, he would now be rid of me."

"Have I not told you," M. de Rosny replied, betraying for the first time some irritation, "that he has greater need of your services than ever? Come, man, be reasonable, or, better still, listen to me." And turning from me, he began to walk up and down the room, his hands behind him. "The King of France—I want to make it as clear to you as possible"—he said, "cannot make head against the League without help, and, willy-nilly, must look for it to the Huguenots, whom he has so long persecuted. The King of Navarre, their acknowledged leader, has offered that help; and so, to spite my master, and prevent a combination so happy for France, has M. de Turenne, who would fain raise the faction he commands to eminence, and knows well how to make his profit out of the dissensions of his country. Are you clear so far, sir?"

I assented. I was becoming absorbed in spite of myself.

"Very well," he resumed. "This evening—never did anything fall out more happily

than Rambouillet's meeting with me—he is a good man!—I have brought the King to this: that if proof of the selfish nature of Turenne's designs be laid before him he will hesitate no longer. That proof exists. A fortnight ago it was here; but it is not here now."

"That is unlucky!" I exclaimed. I was so much interested in his story, as well as flattered by the confidence he was placing in me, that my ill-humour vanished. I went and stood with my shoulder against the mantelpiece, and he, passing to and fro between me and the light, continued his tale.

"A word about this proof," he said. "It came into the King of Navarre's hands before its full value was known to us, for that only accrued to it on M. de Guise's death. A month ago it—this piece of evidence I mean—was at Chizé. A fortnight or so ago it was here in Blois. It is now, M. de Marsac," he continued, facing me suddenly as he came opposite me, "in my house at Rosny."

I started. "You mean Mademoiselle de la Vire?" I cried.

"I mean Mademoiselle de la Vire!" he answered, "who, some month or two ago, overheard M. de Turenne's plans, and contrived to communicate with the King of Navarre. Before the latter could arrange a private interview, however, M. de Turenne got wind of her dangerous knowledge, and swept her off to Chizé. The rest you know, M. de Marsac, if any man knows it."

"But what will you do?" I asked. "She is at Rosny."

"Maignan, whom I trust implicitly, as far as his lights go, will start to fetch her to-morrow. At the same hour I start southwards. You, M. de Marsac, will remain here as my agent, to watch over my interests, to receive Mademoiselle on her arrival, to secure for her a secret interview with the king, to guard her while she remains here. Do you understand?"

"Did I understand?" I could not find words

in which to thank him. My remorse and gratitude, my sense of the wrong I had done him, and of the honour he was doing me, were such that I stood mute before him as I had stood before the king. "You accept, then?" he said, smiling. "You do not deem the adventure beneath you, my friend?"

"I deserve your confidence so little, sir," I answered, stricken to the ground, "that I beg you to speak, while I listen. By attending exactly to your instructions I may prove worthy of the trust reposed in me. And only so."

He embraced me again and again, with a kindness which moved me almost to tears. "You are a man after my own heart," he said, "and if God wills I will make your fortune. Now listen, my friend. To-morrow at Court, as a stranger and a man introduced by Rambouillet, you will be the cynosure of all eyes. Bear yourself bravely. Pay court to the women, but attach yourself to no one in particular. Keep aloof from Retz and the

Spanish faction, but beware especially of Bruhl. He alone will have your secret, and may suspect your design. Mademoiselle should be here in a week; while she is with you, and until she has seen the king, trust no one, suspect everyone, fear all things. Consider the battle won only when the king says, 'I am satisfied'".

Much more he told me, which served its purpose and has been forgotten. Finally he honoured me by bidding me share his pallet with him, that we might talk without restraint, and that if anything occurred to him in the night he might communicate it to me.

"But will not Bruhl denounce me as a Huguenot?" I asked him.

"He will not dare to do so," M. de Rosny answered, "both as a Huguenot himself, and as his master's representative; and, further, because it would displease the king. No, but whatever secret harm one man can do another, that you have to fear. Maignan, when he returns with Mademoiselle, will leave two

men with you; until they come I should borrow a couple of stout fellows from Rambouillet. Do not go out alone after dark, and beware of doorways, especially your own."

A little later, when I thought him asleep, I heard him chuckle; and rising on my elbow I asked him what it was. "Oh, it is your affair," he answered, still laughing silently, so that I felt the mattress shake under him. "I don't envy you one part of your task, my friend."

"What is that?" I said suspiciously.

"Mademoiselle," he answered, stifling with difficulty a burst of laughter. And after that he would not say another word, bad, good, or indifferent, though I felt the bed shake more than once, and knew he was digesting his pleasantry.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE KING'S CHAMBER.

M. DE ROSNY had risen from my side and started on his journey when I opened my eyes in the morning, and awoke to the memory of the task which had been so strangely imposed upon me; and which might, according as the events of the next fortnight shaped themselves, raise me to high position or put an end to my career. He had not forgotten to leave a souvenir behind him, for I found beside my pillow a handsome silver-mounted pistol, bearing the letter "R." and a coronet; nor had I more than discovered this instance of his kindness before Simon Fleix came in to tell me that M. de Rosny had left two hundred crowns in his hands for me.

"Any message with it?" I asked the lad.

"Only that he had taken a keepsake in

exchange," Simon answered, opening the window as he spoke.

In some wonder I began to search, but I could not discover that anything was missing until I came to put on my doublet, when I found that the knot of ribbon which Mademoiselle had flung to me at my departure from Rosny was gone from the inside of the breast, where I had pinned it for safety with a long thorn. The discovery that M. de Rosny had taken this was displeasing to me on more than one account. In the first place, whether Mademoiselle had merely wished to plague me (as was most probable) or not, I was loth to lose it, my days for ladies' favours being past and gone; in the second, I misdoubted the motive which had led him to purloin it, and tormented myself with thinking of the different constructions he might put upon it, and the disparaging view of my trustworthiness which it might lead him to take. I blamed myself much for my carelessness in leaving it where a chance eye might rest upon it; and

more when, questioning Simon further, I learned that M. de Rosny had added, while mounting at the door, "Tell your master, safe bind, safe find; and a careless lover makes a loose mistress."

I felt my cheek burn in a manner unbecoming my years while Simon with some touch of malice repeated this; and I made a vow on the spot, which I kept until I was tempted to break it, to have no more to do with such trifles. Meanwhile, I had to make the best of it; and brisking up, and bidding Simon, who seemed depressed by the baron's departure, brisk up also, I set about my preparations for making such a figure at Court as became me: procuring a black velvet suit, and a cap and feather to match; item, a jewelled clasp to secure the feather; with a yard or two of lace and two changes of fine linen.

Simon had grown sleek at Rosny, and losing something of the wildness which had marked him, presented in the dress M. de Rosny had

given him a very creditable appearance; being also, I fancy, the only equerry in Blois who could write. A groom I engaged on the recommendation of M. de Rambouillet's master of the horse; and I gave out also that I required a couple of valets. It needed only an hour under the barber's hands and a set of new trappings for the Cid to enable me to make a fair show, such as might be taken to indicate a man of ten or twelve thousand livres a year.

In this way I expended a hundred and fifteen crowns. Reflecting that this was a large sum, and that I must keep some money for play, I was glad to learn that in the crowded state of the city even men of high rank were putting up with poor lodging; I determined, therefore, to combine economy with a scheme which I had in my head by taking the rooms in which my mother died, with one room below them. This I did, hiring such furniture as I needed, which was not a great deal. To Simon Fleix, whose

assistance in these matters was invaluable, I passed on much of M. de Rosny's advice, bidding him ruffle it with the best in his station, and inciting him to labour for my advancement by promising to make his fortune whenever my own should be assured. I hoped, indeed, to derive no little advantage from the quickness of wit which had attracted M. de Rosny's attention; although I did not fail to take into account at the same time that the lad was wayward and fitful, prone at one time to depression, and at another to giddiness, and equally uncertain in either mood.

M. de Rambouillet being unable to attend the *levée*, had appointed me to wait upon him at six in the evening; at which hour I presented myself at his lodgings, attended by Simon Fleix. I found him in the midst of half-a-dozen gentlemen whose habit it was to attend him upon all public occasions; and these gallants, greeting me with the same curious and suspicious glances which I have

seen hounds bestow on a strange dog introduced into their kennel, I was speedily made to feel that it is one thing to have business at Court, and another to be well received there.

M. de Rambouillet, somewhat to my surprise, did nothing to remove this impression. On all ordinary occasions a man of stiff and haughty bearing, and thoroughly disliking, though he could not prevent, the intrusion of a third party into a transaction which promised an infinity of credit, he received me so coldly and with so much reserve as for the moment to dash my spirits and throw me back on myself.

During the journey to the Castle, however, which we performed on foot, attended by half-a-dozen armed servants bearing torches, I had time to recall M. de Rosny's advice, and to bethink me of the intimacy which that great man had permitted me; with so much effect in the way of heartening me, that as we crossed the courtyard of the Castle I advanced myself, not without some murmuring on the

part of others, to Rambouillet's elbow, considering that as I was attached to him by the king's command, this was my proper place. I had no desire to quarrel, however, and persisted for some time in disregarding the nudges and muttered words which were exchanged round me, and even the efforts which were made as we mounted the stairs to oust me from my position. But a young gentleman, who showed himself very forward in these attempts, presently stumbling against me, I found it necessary to look at him.

"Sir," he said, in a small and lisping voice, "you trod on my toe."

Though I had not done so, I begged his pardon very politely. But as his only acknowledgment of this courtesy consisted in an attempt to get his knee in front of mine, we were mounting very slowly, the stairs being cumbered with a multitude of servants, who stood on either hand, I did tread on his toe, with a force and directness which made him cry out.

"What is the matter?" Rambouillet asked, looking back hastily.

"Nothing, M. le Marquis," I answered, pressing on steadfastly.

"Sir," my young friend said again, in the same lisping voice, "you trod on my toe."

"I believe I did, sir," I answered.

"You have not yet apologised," he murmured gently in my ear.

"Nay, there you are wrong," I rejoined bluntly; "for it is always my habit to apologise first and tread afterwards."

He smiled as at a pleasant joke; and I am bound to say that his bearing was so admirable that if he had been my son I could have hugged him. "Good!" he answered. "No doubt your sword is as sharp as your wits, sir. I see," he continued, glancing naively at my old scabbard,—he was himself the very gem of a courtier, a slender youth with a pink and white complexion, a dark line for a moustache, and a pearl-drop in his ear,—"it is longing to be out. Perhaps

you will take a turn in the tennis-court to-morrow?"

"With pleasure, sir," I answered, "if you have a father, or your elder brother is grown up."

What answer he would have made to this gibe I do not know, for at that moment we reached the door of the ante-chamber; and this being narrow, and a sentry in the grey uniform of the Swiss Guard compelling all to enter in single file, my young friend was forced to fall back, leaving me free to enter alone, and admire at my leisure a scene at once brilliant and sombre.

The Court being in mourning for the Queen-mother, black predominated in the dresses of those present, and set off very finely the gleaming jewels and gemmed sword-hilts which were worn by the more important personages. The room was spacious and lofty, hung with arras, and lit by candles burning in silver sconces; it rang as we entered with the shrill screaming of a parrot, which was

being teased by a group occupying the farther of the two hearths. Near them play was going on at one table, and primero at a second. In a corner were three or four ladies, in a circle about a red-faced, plebeian-looking man, who was playing at forfeits with one of their number; while the middle of the room seemed dominated by a middle-sized man with a peculiarly inflamed and passionate countenance, who, seated on a table, was inveighing against someone or something in the most violent terms, his language being interlarded with all kinds of strange and forcible oaths. Two or three gentlemen, who had the air of being his followers, stood about him, listening between submission and embarrassment; while beside the nearer fireplace, but at some distance from him, lounged a nobleman, very richly dressed, and wearing on his breast the Cross of the Holy Ghost; who seemed to be the object of his invective, but affecting to ignore it was engaged in conversation with a companion. A bystander

muttering that Crillon had been drinking, I discovered with immense surprise that the declaimer on the table was that famous soldier; and I was still looking at him in wonder, for I had been accustomed all my life to associate courage with modesty, when, the door of the chamber suddenly opening, a general movement in that direction took place. Crillon, disregarding all precedency, sprang from his table and hurried first to the threshold. The Baron de Biron, on the other hand, for the gentleman by the fire was no other, waited, in apparent ignorance of the slight which was being put upon him, until M. de Rambouillet came up; then he went forward with him. Keeping close to my patron's elbow, I entered the chamber immediately behind him.

Crillon had already seized upon the king, and, when we entered, was stating his grievance in a voice not much lower than that which he had used outside. M. de Biron, seeing this, parted from the marquis, and, going aside with

his former companion, sat down on a trunk against the wall; while Rambouillet, followed by myself and three or four gentlemen of his train, advanced to the king, who was standing near the alcove. His majesty seeing him, and thankful, I think, for the excuse, waved Crillon off. "Tut, tut! You told me all that this morning," he said good-naturedly. "And here is Rambouillet, who has, I hope, something fresh to tell. Let him speak to me. Sanctus! Don't look at me as if you would run me through, man. Go and quarrel with some one of your own size."

Crillon at this retired grumbling, and Henry, who had just risen from primero with the Duke of Nevers, nodded to Rambouillet. "Well, my friend, anything fresh?" he cried. He was more at his ease and looked more cheerful than at our former interview; yet still care and suspicion lurked about his peevish mouth, and in the hollows under his gloomy eyes. "A new guest, a new face, or a new game, which have you brought?"

"In a sense, sire, a new face," the marquis answered, bowing, and standing somewhat aside that I might have place.

"Well, I cannot say much for the pretty baggage," quoth the king quickly. And amid a general titter he extended his hand to me. "I'll be sworn, though," he continued, as I rose from my knee, "that you want something, my friend?"

"Nay, sire," I answered, holding up my head boldly—for Crillon's behaviour had been a further lesson to me—"I have, by your leave, the advantage. For your Majesty has supplied me with a new jest. I see many new faces round me, and I have need only of a new game. If your majesty would be pleased to grant me ——"

"There! Said I not so?" cried the king, raising his hand with a laugh. "He does want something. But he seems not undeserving. What does he pray, Rambouillet?"

"A small command," M. de Rambouillet answered, readily playing his part. "And

your Majesty would oblige me if you could grant the Sieur de Marsac's petition. I will answer for it he is a man of experience."

"Chut! A small command?" Henry ejaculated, sitting down suddenly in apparent ill-humour. "It is what everyone wants—when they do not want big ones. Still, I suppose," he continued, taking up a comfit-box, which lay beside him, and opening it, "if you do not get what you want for him you will sulk like the rest, my friend."

"Your Majesty has never had cause to complain of me," quoth the marquis, forgetting his *rôle*, or too proud to play it.

"Tut, tut, tut, tut! Take it, and trouble me no more," the king rejoined. "Will pay for twenty men do for him? Very well then. There, M. de Marsac," he continued, nodding at me and yawning, "your request is granted. You will find some other pretty baggages over there. Go to them. And now, Rambouillet," he went on, resuming his spirits as he turned to matters of more importance, "here is a new

sweetmeat Zamet has sent me. I have made Zizi sick with it. Will you try it? It is flavoured with white mulberries."

Thus dismissed, I fell back; and stood for a moment, at a loss whither to turn, in the absence of either friends or acquaintances. His Majesty, it is true, had bidden me go to certain pretty baggages, meaning, apparently, five ladies who were seated at the farther end of the room, diverting themselves with as many cavaliers; but the compactness of this party, the beauty of the ladies, and the merry peals of laughter which proceeded from them, telling of a wit and vivacity beyond the ordinary, sapped the resolution which had borne me well hitherto. I felt that to attack such a phalanx, even with the king's goodwill, was beyond the daring of a Crillon, and I looked round to see whether I could not amuse myself in some more modest fashion.

The material was not lacking. Crillon, still mouthing out his anger, strode up and down in front of the trunk on which M. de Biron

was seated; but the latter was, or affected to be, asleep. "Crillon is for ever going into rages now," a courtier beside me whispered.

"Yes," his fellow answered, with a shrug of the shoulder; "it is a pity there is no one to tame him. But he has such a long reach, morbleu!"

"It is not that so much as the fellow's fury," the first speaker rejoined under his breath. "He fights like a mad thing; fencing is no use against him."

The other nodded. For a moment the wild idea of winning renown by taming M. de Crillon occurred to me as I stood alone in the middle of the floor; but it had not more than passed through my brain when I felt my elbow touched, and turned to find the young gentleman whom I had encountered on the stairs standing by my side.

"Sir," he lisped, in the same small voice, "I think you trod on my toe a while ago?"

I stared at him, wondering what he meant

by this absurd repetition. "Well, sir," I answered drily, "and if I did?"

"Perhaps," he said, stroking his chin with his jewelled fingers, "pending our meeting to-morrow, you would allow me to consider it as a kind of introduction?"

"If it please you," I answered, bowing stiffly, and wondering what he would be at.

"Thank you," he answered. "It does please me, under the circumstances; for there is a lady here who desires a word with you. I took up her challenge. Will you follow me?"

He bowed, and turned in his languid fashion. I, turning too, saw, with secret dismay, that the five ladies, referred to above, were all now gazing at me, as expecting my approach; and this with such sportive glances as told only too certainly of some plot already in progress or some trick to be presently played me. Yet I could not see that I had any choice save to obey, and, following my leader with as much dignity as I could

compass, I presently found myself bowing before the lady who sat nearest, and who seemed to be the leader of these nymphs.

"Nay, sir," she said, eyeing me curiously, yet with a merry face, "I do not need you; I do not look so high!"

Turning in confusion to the next, I was surprised to see before me the lady whose lodging I had invaded in my search for Mademoiselle de la Vire—she, I mean, who, having picked up the velvet knot, had dropped it so providentially where Simon Fleix found it. She looked at me, blushing and laughing; and the young gentleman, who had done her errand, presenting me by name, she asked me, while the others listened, whether I had found my mistress.

Before I could answer, the lady to whom I had first addressed myself interposed. "Stop, sir!" she cried. "What is this—a tale, a jest, a game, or a forfeit?"

"An adventure, madam," I answered, bowing low.

"Of gallantry, I'll be bound," she exclaimed. "Fie, Madame de Bruhl, and you but six months married!"

Madame de Bruhl protested, laughing, that she had no more to do with it than Mercury. "At the worst," she said, "I carried the *poulets!* But I can assure you, duchess, this gentleman should be able to tell us a very fine story, if he would."

The duchess and all the other ladies clapping their hands at this, and crying out that the story must and should be told, I found myself in a prodigious quandary; and one wherein my wits derived as little assistance as possible from the bright eyes and saucy looks which environed me. Moreover, the commotion attracted other listeners. I found my position, while I tried to extricate myself, growing each moment worse, so that I began to fear that as I had little imagination I should perforce have to tell the truth. The mere thought of this threw me into a cold perspiration, lest I should let slip something

of consequence, and prove myself unworthy of the trust which M. de Rosny had reposed in me.

At the moment when, despairing of extricating myself, I was stooping over Madame de Bruhl, begging her to assist me, I heard, amid the babel of laughter and raillery which surrounded me—certain of the courtiers having already formed hands in a circle and sworn I should not depart without satisfying the ladies—a voice which struck a chord in my memory. I turned to see who the speaker was, and encountered no other than M. de Bruhl himself; who, with a flushed and angry face, was listening to the explanation which a friend was pouring into his ear. Standing at the moment with my knee on Madame de Bruhl's stool, and remembering very well the meeting on the stairs, I conceived in a flash that the man was jealous; but whether he had yet heard my name, or had any clue to link me with the person who had rescued Mademoiselle de la Vire from his clutches, I

could not tell. Nevertheless, his presence led my thoughts into a new channel. The determination to punish him began to take form in my mind, and very quickly I regained my composure. Still I was for giving him one chance. Accordingly I stooped once more to Madame de Bruhl's ear, and begged her to spare me the embarrassment of telling my tale. But then, finding her pitiless, as I expected, and the rest of the company growing more and more insistent, I hardened my heart to go through with the fantastic notion which had occurred to me.

Indicating by a gesture that I was prepared to obey, and the duchess crying for a hearing, this was presently obtained, the sudden silence adding the king himself to my audience. "What is it?" he asked, coming up effusively, with a lap-dog in his arms. "A new scandal, eh?"

"No, sire, a new tale-teller," the duchess answered pertly. "If your Majesty will sit, we shall hear him the sooner."

He pinched her ear and sat down in the chair which a page presented. "What! is it Rambouillet's *grison* again?" he said with some surprise. "Well, fire away, man. But who brought you forward as a Rabelais?"

There was a general cry of "Madame de Bruhl!" whereat that lady shook her fair hair about her face, and cried out for someone to bring her a mask.

"Ha, I see!" said the king drily, looking pointedly at M. de Bruhl, who was as black as thunder. "But go on, man."

The king's advent, by affording me a brief respite, had enabled me to collect my thoughts, and, disregarding the ribald interruptions, which at first were frequent, I began as follows: "I am no Rabelais, sire," I said, "but droll things happen to the most unlikely. Once upon a time it was the fortune of a certain swain, whom I will call Dromio, to arrive in a town not a hundred miles from Blois, having in his company a nymph of great beauty, who had been entrusted to his care by

her parents. He had not more than lodged her in his apartments, however, before she was decoyed away by a trick, and borne off against her will by a young gallant, who had seen her and been smitten by her charms. Dromio, returning, and finding his mistress gone, gave way to the most poignant grief. He ran up and down the city, seeking her in every place, and filling all places with his lamentations; but for a time in vain, until chance led him to a certain street, where, in an almost incredible manner, he found a clue to her by discovering underfoot a knot of velvet, bearing Phyllida's name wrought on it in delicate needlework, with the words, 'A moi!'"

"Sanctus!" cried the king, amid a general murmur of surprise, "that is well devised! Proceed, sir. Go on like that, and we will make your twenty men twenty-five."

"Dromio," I continued, "at sight of this trifle experienced the most diverse emotions; for while he possessed in it a clue to his

mistress's fate, he had still to use it so as to discover the place whither she had been hurried. It occurred to him at last to begin his search with the house before which the knot had lain. Ascending accordingly to the second-floor, he found there a fair lady reclining on a couch, who started up in affright at his appearance. He hastened to reassure her, and to explain the purpose of his coming, and learned after a conversation with which I will not trouble your Majesty, though it was sufficiently diverting, that the lady had found the velvet knot in another part of the town, and had herself dropped it again in front of her own house."

"Pourquoi?" the king asked, interrupting me.

"The swain, sire," I answered, "was too much taken up with his own troubles to bear that in mind, even if he learned it. But this delicacy did not save him from misconception, for as he descended from the lady's apartment he met her husband on the stairs."

"Good!" the king exclaimed, rubbing his hands in glee. "The husband!" And under cover of the gibe and the courtly laugh which followed it M. de Bruhl's start of surprise passed unnoticed save by me.

"The husband," I resumed, "seeing a stranger descending his staircase, was for stopping him and learning the reason of his presence; but Dromio, whose mind was with Phyllida, refused to stop, and, evading his questions, hurried to the part of the town where the lady had told him she found the velvet knot. Here, sire, at the corner of a lane running between garden-walls, he found a great house, barred and gloomy, and well adapted to the abductor's purpose. Moreover, scanning it on every side, he presently discovered, tied about the bars of an upper window, a knot of white linen, the very counterpart of that velvet one which he bore in his breast. Thus he knew that the nymph was imprisoned in that room!"

"I will make it twenty-five, as I am a good

Churchman!" his Majesty exclaimed, dropping the little dog he was nursing into the duchess's lap, and taking out his comfit-box. "Rambouillet," he added languidly, "your friend is a treasure!"

I bowed my acknowledgments, and took occasion as I did so to step a pace aside, so as to command a view of Madame de Bruhl, as well as her husband. Hitherto madame, willing to be accounted a part in so pretty a romance, and ready enough also, unless I was mistaken, to cause her husband a little mild jealousy, had listened to the story with a certain sly demureness. But this I foresaw would not last long; and I felt something like compunction as the moment for striking the blow approached. But I had now no choice. "The best is yet to come, sire," I went on, "as I think you will acknowledge in a moment. Dromio, though he had discovered his mistress, was still in the depths of despair. He wandered round and round the house, seeking ingress and finding none, until at

length, sunset approaching, and darkness redoubling his fears for the nymph, fortune took pity on him. As he stood in front of the house he saw the abductor come out, lighted by two servants. Judge of his surprise, sire," I continued, looking round and speaking slowly, to give full effect to my words, "when he recognised in him no other than the husband of the lady who, by picking up and again dropping the velvet knot, had contributed so much to the success of his search!"

"Ha! these husbands!" cried the king. And slapping his knee in an ecstacy at his own acuteness, he laughed in his seat till he rolled again. "These husbands! Did I not say so?"

The whole Court gave way to like applause, and clapped their hands as well, so that few save those who stood nearest took notice of Madame de Bruhl's faint cry, and still fewer understood why she rose up suddenly from her stool and stood gazing at her husband with burning cheeks and clenched hands. She took no heed of me, much less of the

laughing crowd round her, but looked only at him with her soul in her eyes. He, after uttering one hoarse curse, seemed to have no thought for any but me. To have the knowledge that his own wife had baulked him brought home to him in this mocking fashion, to find how little a thing had tripped him that day, to learn how blindly he had played into the hands of fate, above all to be exposed at once to his wife's resentment and the ridicule of the Court—for he could not be sure that I should not the next moment disclose his name, —all so wrought on him that for a moment I thought he would strike me in the presence. His rage, indeed, did what I had not meant to do. For the king, catching sight of his face, and remembering that Madame de Bruhl had elicited the story, screamed suddenly, "Haro!" and pointed ruthlessly at him with his finger. After that I had no need to speak, the story leaping from eye to eye, and every eye settling on Bruhl, who sought in vain to compose his features. Madame, who surpassed him, as

women commonly do surpass men, in self-control, was the first to recover herself, and sitting down as quickly as she had risen, confronted alike her husband and her rivals with a pale smile.

For a moment curiosity and excitement kept all breathless, the eye alone busy. Then the king laughed mischievously. "Come, M. de Bruhl," he cried, "perhaps you will finish the tale for us?" And he threw himself back in his chair, a sneer on his lips.

"Or why not Madame de Bruhl?" said the duchess, with her head on one side and her eyes glittering over her fan. "Madame would, I am sure, tell it so well."

But madame only shook her head, smiling always that forced smile. For Bruhl himself, glaring from face to face like a bull about to charge, I have never seen a man more out of countenance, or more completely brought to bay. His discomposure, exposed as he was to the ridicule of all present, was such that the presence in which he stood scarcely

hindered him from some violent attack; and his eyes, which had wandered from me at the king's word, presently returning to me again, he so far forgot himself as to raise his hand furiously, uttering at the same time a savage oath.

The king cried out angrily, "Have a care, sir!" But Bruhl only heeded this so far as to thrust aside those who stood round him and push his way hurriedly through the circle.

"Arnidieu!" cried the king, when he was gone. "This is fine conduct! I have half a mind to send after him and have him put where his hot blood would cool a little. Or ——"

He stopped abruptly, his eyes resting on me. The relative positions of Bruhl and myself as the agents of Rosny and Turenne occurred to him for the first time, I think, and suggested the idea, perhaps, that I had laid a trap for him, and that he had fallen into it. At any rate his face grew darker and darker, and at last, "A nice kettle of fish this is you

have prepared for us, sir!" he muttered, gazing at me gloomily.

The sudden change in his humour took even the courtiers by surprise. Faces a moment before broad with smiles grew long again. The less important personages looked uncomfortably at one another, and with one accord frowned on me. "If your Majesty would please to hear the end of the story at another time?" I suggested humbly, beginning to wish with all my heart that I had never said a word.

"Chut!" he answered, rising, his face still betraying his perturbation. "Well, be it so. For the present you may go, sir. Duchess, give me Zizi, and come to my closet. I want you to see my puppies. Retz, my good friend, do you come too. I have something to say to you. Gentlemen, you need not wait. It is likely I shall be late."

And, with the utmost abruptness, he broke up the circle.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE JACOBIN MONK.

Had I needed any reminder of the uncertainty of Court favour, or an instance whence I might learn the lesson of modesty, and so stand in less danger of presuming on my new and precarious prosperity, I had it in this episode, and in the demeanour of the company round me. On the circle breaking up in confusion, I found myself the centre of general regard, but regard of so dubious a character, the persons who would have been the first to compliment me had the king retired earlier, standing farthest aloof now, that I felt myself rather insulted than honoured by it. One or two, indeed, of the more cautious spirits did approach me; but it was with the air of men providing against a danger particularly remote, their half-hearted speeches serving only to fix

them in my memory as belonging to a class, especially abhorrent to me—the class, I mean, of those who would run at once with the hare and the hounds.

I was rejoiced to find that on one person, and that the one whose disposition towards me was, next to the king's, of first importance, this episode had produced a different impression. Feeling, as I made for the door, a touch on my arm, I turned to find M. de Rambouillet at my elbow, regarding me with a glance of mingled esteem and amusement; in fine, with a very different look from that which had been my welcome earlier in the evening. I was driven to suppose that he was too great a man, or too sure of his favour with the king, to be swayed by the petty motives which actuated the Court generally, for he laid his hand familiarly on my shoulder, and walked on beside me.

"Well, my friend," he said, "you have distinguished yourself finely! I do not know that I ever remember a pretty woman making

more stir in one evening. But if you are wise you will not go home alone to-night."

"I have my sword, M. le Marquis," I answered, somewhat proudly.

"Which will avail you little against a knife in the back!" he retorted drily. "What attendance have you?"

"My equerry, Simon Fleix, is on the stairs."

"Good, so far; but not enough," he replied, as we reached the head of the staircase. "You had better come home with me now, and two or three of my fellows shall go on to your lodging with you. Do you know, my friend," he continued, looking at me keenly, "you are either a very clever or a very foolish man."

I made answer modestly. "Neither the one, I fear, nor the other, I hope, sir," I said.

"Well, you have done a very pertinent thing," he replied, "for good or evil. You have let the enemy know what he has to expect; and he is not one, I warn you, to be despised. But whether you have been very

wise or very foolish in declaring open war remains to be seen."

"A week will show," I answered.

He turned and looked at me. "You take it coolly," he said.

"I have been knocking about the world for forty years, marquis," I rejoined.

He muttered something about Rosny having a good eye, and then stopped to adjust his cloak. We were by this time in the street. Making me go hand in hand with him, he requested the other gentlemen to draw their swords; and the servants being likewise armed and numbering half a score or more, with pikes and torches, we made up a very formidable party, and caused, I think, more alarm as we passed through the streets to Rambouillet's lodging than we had any reason to feel. Not that we had it all to ourselves, for the attendance at Court that evening being large, and the circle breaking up, as I have described, more abruptly than usual, the vicinity of the Castle was in a ferment, and the streets lead-

ing from it were alive with the lights and laughter of parties similar to our own.

At the door of the marquis's lodging I prepared to take leave of him with many expressions of gratitude; but he would have me enter and sit down with him to a light refection, which it was his habit to take before retiring. Two of his gentlemen sat down with us, and a valet, who was in his confidence, waiting on us, we made very merry over the scene in the presence. I learned that M. de Bruhl was far from popular at Court; but being known to possess some kind of hold over the king, and enjoying besides a great reputation for recklessness and skill with the sword, he had played a high part for a length of time, and attached to himself, especially since the death of Guise, a considerable number of followers.

"The truth is," one of the marquis's gentlemen, who was a little heated with wine, observed, "there is nothing at this moment which a bold and unscrupulous man may not win in France!"

"Nor a bold and Christian gentleman for France!" replied M. de Rambouillet with some asperity. "By the way," he continued, turning abruptly to the servant, "where is M. François?"

The valet answered that he had not returned with us from the Castle. The Marquis expressed himself annoyed at this, and I gathered, firstly, that the missing man was his near kinsman, and, secondly, that he was also the young spark who had been so forward to quarrel with me earlier in the evening. Determining to refer the matter, should it become pressing, to Rambouillet for adjustment, I took leave of him, and attended by two of his servants, whom he kindly transferred to my service for the present, I started towards my lodging a little before midnight.

The moon had risen while we were at supper, and its light, which whitened the gables on one side of the street, diffused a glimmer below sufficient to enable us to avoid the kennel. Seeing this, I bade the men put out

our torch. Frost had set in, and a keen wind was blowing, so that we were glad to hurry on at a good pace; and the streets being quite deserted at this late hour, or haunted only by those who had come to dread the town marshal, we met no one and saw no lights. I fell to thinking, for my part, of the evening I had spent searching Blois for Mademoiselle, and of the difference between then and now. Nor did I fail while on this track to retrace it still farther to the evening of our arrival at my mother's; whence, as a source, such kindly and gentle thoughts welled up in my mind as were natural, and the unfailing affection of that gracious woman required. These taking the place for the moment of the anxious calculations and stern purposes which had of late engrossed me, were only ousted by something which, happening under my eyes, brought me violently and abruptly to myself.

This was the sudden appearance of three men, who issued one by one from an alley a score of yards in front of us, and after pausing

a second to look back the way they had come, flitted on in single file along the street, disappearing, as far as the darkness permitted me to judge, round a second corner. I by no means liked their appearance, and as a scream and the clash of arms rang out next moment from the direction in which they had gone, I cried lustily to Simon Fleix to follow, and ran on, believing from the rascals' movements that they were after no good, but that rather some honest man was like to be sore beset.

On reaching the lane down which they had plunged, however, I paused a moment, considering not so much its blackness, which was intense, the eaves nearly meeting overhead, as the small chance I had of distinguishing between attackers and attacked. But Simon and the men overtaking me, and the sounds of a sharp tussle still continuing, I decided to venture, and plunged into the alley, my left arm well advanced, with the skirt of my cloak thrown over it, and my sword drawn back. I shouted as I ran, thinking that the knaves

might desist on hearing me; and this was what happened, for as I arrived on the scene of action—the farther end of the alley—two men took to their heels, while of two who remained, one lay at length in the kennel, and another rose slowly from his knees.

"You are just in time, sir," the latter said, breathing hard, but speaking with a preciseness which sounded familiar. "I am obliged to you, sir, whoever you are. The villains had got me down, and in a few minutes more would have made my mother childless. By the way, you have no light, have you?" he continued, lisping like a woman.

One of M. de Rambouillet's men, who had by this time come up, cried out that it was Monsieur François.

"Yes, blockhead!" the young gentleman answered with the utmost coolness. "But I asked for a light, not for my name."

"I trust you are not hurt, sir?" I said, putting up my sword.

"Scratched only," he answered, betraying

no surprise on learning who it was had come up so opportunely; as he no doubt did learn from my voice, for he continued with a bow, "A slight price to pay for the knowledge that M. de Marsac is as forward on the field as on the stairs."

I bowed my acknowledgments.

"This fellow," I said, "is he much hurt?"

"Tut, tut! I thought I had saved the marshal all trouble," M. François replied. "Is he not dead, Gil?"

The poor wretch made answer for himself, crying out piteously and in a choking voice, for a priest to shrive him. At that moment Simon Fleix returned with our torch, which he had lighted at the nearest cross-streets, where there was a brazier; and we saw by this light that the man was coughing up blood, and might live perhaps half an hour.

"Mordieu! That comes of thrusting too high!" M. François muttered, regretfully. "An inch lower, and there would have been none of this trouble! I suppose somebody

must fetch one. Gil," he continued, "run, man, to the sacristy in the Rue St. Denys, and get a Father. Or—stay! Help to lift him under the lee of the wall there. The wind cuts like a knife here."

The streets being on the slope of the hill, the lower part of the house nearest us stood a few feet from the ground, on wooden piles, and the space underneath it, being enclosed at the back and sides, was used as a cart-house. The servants moved the dying man into this rude shelter, and I accompanied them, being unwilling to leave the young gentleman alone. Not wishing, however, to seem to interfere, I walked to the farther end, and sat down on the shaft of a cart, whence I idly admired the strange aspect of the group I had left, as the glare of the torch brought now one and now another into prominence, and sometimes shone on M. François' jewelled fingers toying with his tiny moustache, and sometimes on the writhing features of the man at his feet.

On a sudden, and before Gil had started on his errand, I saw there was a priest among them. I had not seen him enter, nor had I any idea whence he came. My first impression was only that here was a priest, and that he was looking at me—not at the man craving his assistance on the floor, or at those who stood round him, but at me, who sat away in the shadow beyond the ring of light!

This was surprising; but a second glance explained it, for then I saw that he was the Jacobin monk who had haunted my mother's dying hours. And, amazed as much at this strange *rencontre* as at the man's boldness, I sprang up and strode forwards, forgetting, in an impulse of righteous anger, the office he came to do. And this the more as his face, still turned to me, seemed instinct to my eyes with triumphant malice. As I moved towards him, however, with a fierce exclamation on my lips, he suddenly dropped his eyes and knelt. Immediately M. François cried "Hush!" and the men turned to me with

scandalised faces. I fell back. Yet even then, whispering on his knees by the dying man, the knave was thinking, I felt sure, of me, glorying at once in his immunity and the power it gave him to tantalise me without fear.

I determined, whatever the result, to intercept him when all was over; and on the man dying a few minutes later, I walked resolutely to the open side of the shed, thinking it likely he might try to slip away as mysteriously as he had come. He stood a moment speaking to M. François, however, and then, accompanied by him, advanced boldly to meet me, a lean smile on his face.

"Father Antoine," M. François said politely, "tells me that he knows you, M. de Marsac, and desires to speak to you, *mal-à-propos* as is the occasion."

"And I to him," I answered, trembling with rage, and only restraining by an effort the impulse which would have had me dash my hand in the priest's pale, smirking face.

"I have waited long for this moment," I continued, eyeing him steadily, as M. François withdrew out of hearing, "and had you tried to avoid me, I would have dragged you back, though all your tribe were here to protect you."

His presence so maddened me that I scarcely knew what I said. I felt my breath come quickly, I felt the blood surge to my head, and it was with difficulty I restrained myself when he answered with well-affected sanctity, "Like mother, like son, I fear, sir. Huguenots both."

I choked with rage. "What!" I said, "you dare to threaten me as you threatened my mother? Fool! know that only to-day for the purpose of discovering and punishing you I took the rooms in which my mother died."

"I know it," he answered quietly. And then in a second, as by magic, he altered his demeanour completely, raising his head and looking me in the face. "That, and so much

besides, I know," he continued, giving me, to my astonishment, frown for frown, "that if you will listen to me for a moment, M. de Marsac, and listen quietly, I will convince you that the folly is not on my side."

Amazed at his new manner, in which there was none of the madness that had marked him at our first meeting, but a strange air of authority, unlike anything I had associated with him before, I signed to him to proceed.

"You think that I am in your power?" he said smiling.

"I think," I retorted swiftly, "that, escaping me now, you will have at your heels henceforth a worse enemy than even your own sins."

"Just so," he answered, nodding. "Well, I am going to show you that the reverse is the case; and that you are as completely in my hands, to spare or to break, as this straw. In the first place, you are here in Blois, a Huguenot!"

"Chut!" I exclaimed contemptuously, affect-

ing a confidence I was far from feeling. "A little while back that might have availed you. But we are in Blois, not Paris. It is not far to the Loire, and you have to deal with a man now, not with a woman. It is you who have cause to tremble, not I."

"You think to be protected," he answered, with a sour smile, "even on this side of the Loire, I see. But one word to the Pope's Legate, or to the Duke of Nevers, and you would see the inside of a dungeon, if not worse. For the king ——"

"King or no king!" I answered, interrupting him with more assurance than I felt, seeing that I remembered only too well Henry's remark that Rosny must not look to him for protection, "I fear you not a whit! And that reminds me. I have heard you talk treason—rank, black treason, priest, as ever sent man to rope, and I will give you up. By heaven I will!" I cried, my rage increasing, as I discerned, more and more clearly, the dangerous hold he had over me. "You have

threatened me! One word, and I will send you to the gallows!"

"Sh!" he answered, indicating M. François by a gesture of the hand. "For your own sake, not mine. This is fine talking, but you have not yet heard all I know. Would you like to hear how you have spent the last month? Two days after Christmas, M. de Marsac, you left Chizé with a young lady—I can give you her name, if you please. Four days afterwards you reached Blois, and took her to your mother's lodging. Next morning she left you for M. de Bruhl. Two days later you tracked her to a house in the Ruelle d'Arcy, and freed her, but lost her in the moment of victory. Then you stayed in Blois until your mother's death, going a day or two later to M. de Rosny's house by Mantes, where Mademoiselle still is. Yesterday you arrived in Blois with M. de Rosny; you went to his lodging; you ——"

"Proceed, sir," I muttered, leaning forward. Under cover of my cloak, I drew my dagger

half-way from its sheath. "Proceed, sir, I pray," I repeated with dry lips.

"You slept there," he continued, holding his ground, but shuddering slightly, either from cold or because he perceived my movement and read my design in my eyes. "This morning you remained here in attendance on M. de Rambouillet."

For the moment I breathed freely again, perceiving that though he knew much, the one thing on which M. de Rosny's design turned had escaped him. The secret interview with the king, which compromised alike Henry himself and M. de Rambouillet, had apparently passed unnoticed and unsuspected. With a sigh of intense relief I slid back the dagger, which I had fully made up my mind to use had he known all, and drew my cloak round me with a shrug of feigned indifference. I sweated to think what he did know, but our interview with the king having escaped him, I breathed again.

"Well, sir," I said curtly, "I have listened. And now, what is the purpose of all this?"

"My purpose?" he answered, his eyes glittering. "To show you that you are in my power. You are the agent of M. de Rosny. I, the agent, however humble, of the Holy Catholic League. Of your movements I know all. What do you know of mine?"

"Knowledge," I made grim answer, "is not everything, sir priest."

"It is more than it was," he said, smiling his thin-lipped smile. "It is going to be more than it is. And I know much—about you, M. de Marsac."

"You know too much!" I retorted, feeling his covert threats close around me like the folds of some great serpent. "But you are imprudent, I think. Will you tell me what is to prevent me striking you through where you stand, and ridding myself at a blow of so much knowledge?"

"The presence of three men, M. de Marsac," he answered lightly, waving his hand towards M. François and the others, "every one of whom would give you up to justice. You

forget that you are north of the Loire, and that priests are not to be massacred here with impunity, as in your lawless south country. However, enough. The night is cold, and M. d'Agen grows suspicious as well as impatient. We have, perhaps, spoken too long already. Permit me"—he bowed and drew back a step —"to resume this discussion to-morrow."

Despite his politeness and the hollow civility with which he thus sought to close the interview, the light of triumph which shone in his eyes, as the glare of the torch fell athwart them, no less than the assured tone of his voice, told me clearly that he knew his power. He seemed, indeed, transformed: no longer a slinking peaceful clerk, preying on a woman's fears, but a bold and crafty schemer, skilled and unscrupulous, possessed of hidden knowledge and hidden resources; the personification of evil intellect. For the moment, knowing all I knew, and particularly the responsibilities which lay before me, and the interests committed to my hands, I quailed,

confessing myself unequal to him. I forgot the righteous vengeance I owed him; I cried out helplessly against the ill-fortune which had brought him across my path. I saw myself enmeshed and fettered beyond hope of escape, and by an effort only controlled the despair I felt.

"To-morrow?" I muttered hoarsely. "At what time?"

He shook his head with a cunning smile. "A thousand thanks, but I will settle that myself!" he answered. "Au revoir!" And muttering a word of leave-taking to M. François d'Agen, he blessed the two servants, and went out into the night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE OFFER OF THE LEAGUE.

When the last sound of his footsteps died away, I awoke as from an evil dream, and becoming conscious of the presence of M. François and the servants, recollected mechanically that I owed the former an apology for my discourtesy in keeping him standing in the cold. I began to offer it; but my distress and confusion of mind were such that in the middle of a set phrase I broke off, and stood looking fixedly at him, my trouble so plain that he asked me civilly if anything ailed me.

"No," I answered, turning from him impatiently; "nothing, nothing, sir. Or tell me," I continued, with an abrupt change of mind, "who is that who has just left us?"

"Father Antoine, do you mean?"

"Ay, Father Antoine, Father Judas—call him what you like," I rejoined bitterly.

"Then if you leave the choice to me," M. François answered with grave politeness, "I would rather call him something more pleasant, M. de Marsac—James or John, let us say. For there is little said here which does not come back to him. If walls have ears, the walls of Blois are in his pay. But I thought you knew him," he continued. "He is secretary, confidant, chaplain, what you will, to Cardinal Retz, and one of those whom—in your ear—greater men court and more powerful men lean on. If I had to choose between them, I would rather cross M. de Crillon."

"I am obliged to you," I muttered, checked as much by his manner as his words.

"Not at all," he answered more lightly. "Any information I have is at your disposal."

However, I saw the imprudence of venturing farther, and hastened to take leave of him, persuading him to allow one of M. de Rambouillet's servants to accompany him home.

He said that he should call on me in the morning; and forcing myself to answer him in a suitable manner, I saw him depart one way, and myself, accompanied by Simon Fleix, went off another. My feet were frozen with long standing—I think the corpse we left was scarce colder—but my head was hot with feverish doubts and fears. The moon had sunk and the streets were dark. Our torch had burned out, and we had no light. But where my followers saw only blackness and vacancy, I saw an evil smile and a lean visage fraught with menace and exultation.

For the more closely I directed my mind to the position in which I stood, the graver it seemed. Pitted against Bruhl alone, amid strange surroundings and in an atmosphere of Court intrigue, I had thought my task sufficiently difficult and the disadvantages under which I laboured sufficiently serious before this interview. Conscious of a certain rustiness and a distaste for finesse, with resources so inferior to Bruhl's that even M. de Rosny's

liberality had not done much to make up the difference, I had accepted the post offered me rather readily than sanguinely; with joy, seeing that it held out the hope of high reward, but with no certain expectation of success. Still, matched with a man of violent and headstrong character, I had seen no reason to despair; nor any why I might not arrange the secret meeting between the king and mademoiselle with safety, and conduct to its end an intrigue simple and unsuspected, and requiring for its execution rather courage and caution than address or experience.

Now, however, I found that Bruhl was not my only or my most dangerous antagonist. Another was in the field—or, to speak more correctly, was waiting outside the arena, ready to snatch the prize when we should have disabled one another. From a dream of Bruhl and myself as engaged in a competition for the king's favour wherein neither could expose the other nor appeal even in the last resort to the joint enemies of his Majesty and ourselves, I

awoke to a very different state of things—I awoke to find those enemies the masters of the situation, possessed of the clue to our plans, and permitting them only as long as they seemed to threaten no serious peril to themselves.

No discovery could be more mortifying or more fraught with terror. The perspiration stood on my brow as I recalled the warning which M. de Rosny had uttered against Cardinal Retz, or noted down the various points of knowledge which were in Father Antoine's possession. He knew every event of the last month, with one exception, and could tell, I verily believed, how many crowns I had in my pouch. Conceding this, and the secret sources of information he must possess, what hope had I of keeping my future movements from him? Mademoiselle's arrival would be known to him before she had well passed the gates; nor was it likely, or even possible, that I should again succeed in reaching the king's presence untraced and

unsuspected. In fine, I saw myself, equally with Bruhl, a puppet in this man's hands, my goings out and my comings in watched and reported to him—his mercy the only bar between myself and destruction. At any moment I might be arrested as a Huguenot, the enterprise in which I was engaged ruined, and Mademoiselle de la Vire exposed to the violence of Bruhl or the equally dangerous intrigues of the League.

Under these circumstances I fancied sleep impossible; but habit and weariness are strong persuaders, and when I reached my lodging I slept long and soundly, as became a man who had looked danger in the face more than once. The morning light too brought an accession both of courage and hope. I reflected on the misery of my condition at St. Jean d'Angely, without friends or resources, and driven to herd with such a man as Fresnoy. And telling myself that the gold crowns which M. de Rosny had lavished upon me were not for nothing, nor the more precious

friendship with which he had honoured me a gift that called for no return, I rose with new spirit and a countenance which threw Simon Fleix—who had seen me lie down the picture of despair—into the utmost astonishment.

"You have had good dreams," he said, eyeing me jealously and with a disturbed air.

"I had a very evil one last night," I answered lightly, wondering a little why he looked at me so, and why he seemed to resent my return to hopefulness and courage. I might have followed this train of thought farther with advantage, since I possessed a clue to his state of mind; but at that moment a summons at the door called him away to it, and he presently ushered in M. François, who, saluting me with punctilious politeness, had not said fifty words before he introduced the subject of his toe—no longer, however, in a hostile spirit, but as the happy medium which had led him to recognise the worth and sterling qualities—so he was pleased to say—of his preserver.

I was delighted to find him in this frame of mind, and told him frankly that the friendship with which his kinsman, M. de Rambouillet, honoured me would prevent me giving him satisfaction save in the last resort. He replied that the service I had done him was such as to render this immaterial, unless I had myself cause of offence; which I was forward to deny.

We were paying one another compliments after this fashion, while I regarded him with the interest which the middle-aged bestow on the young and gallant in whom they see their own youth and hopes mirrored, when the door was again opened, and after a moment's pause admitted, equally, I think, to the disgust of M. François and myself, the form of Father Antoine.

Seldom have two men more diverse stood, I believe, in a room together; seldom has any greater contrast been presented to a man's eyes than that opened to mine on this occasion. On the one side the gay young spark, with

his short cloak, his fine suit of black-and-silver, his trim limbs, and jewelled hilt and chased comfit-box; on the other, the tall, stooping monk, lean-jawed and bright-eyed, whose gown hang about him in coarse ungainly folds. And M. François' sentiment on first seeing the other was certainly dislike. In spite of this, however, he bestowed a greeting on the newcomer which evidenced a secret awe, and in other ways showed so plain a desire to please that I felt my fears of the priest return in force. I reflected that the talents which in such a garb could win the respect of M. François d'Agen—a brilliant star among the younger courtiers, and one of a class much given to thinking scorn of their fathers' roughness—must be both great and formidable; and, so considering, I received the monk with a distant courtesy which I had once little thought to extend to him. I put aside for the moment the private grudge I bore him with so much justice, and remembered only the burden which lay on me in my contest with him.

I conjectured without difficulty that he chose to come at this time, when M. François was with me, out of a cunning regard to his own safety; and I was not surprised when M. François, beginning to make his adieux, Father Antoine begged him to wait below, adding that he had something of importance to communicate. He advanced his request in terms of politeness bordering on humility; but I could clearly see that, in assenting to it, M. d'Agen bowed to a will stronger than his own, and would, had he dared to follow his own bent, have given a very different answer. As it was he retired—nominally to give an order to his lackey—with a species of impatient self-restraint which it was not difficult to construe.

Left alone with me, and assured that we had no listeners, the monk was not slow in coming to the point.

"You have thought over what I told you last night?" he said brusquely, dropping in a moment the suave manner which he had maintained in M. François's presence.

I replied coldly that I had.

"And you understand the position?" he continued quickly, looking at me from under his brows as he stood before me, with one clenched fist on the table. "Or shall I tell you more? Shall I tell you how poor and despised you were some weeks ago, M. de Marsac,—you who now go in velvet, and have three men at your back? Or whose gold it is has brought you here, and made you this? Chut! Do not let us trifle. You are here as the secret agent of the King of Navarre. It is my business to learn your plans and his intentions, and I propose to do so."

"Well?" I said.

"I am prepared to buy them," he answered; and his eyes sparkled as he spoke, with a greed which set me yet more on my guard.

"For whom?" I asked. Having made up my mind that I must use the same weapons as my adversary, I reflected that to express indignation, such as might become a young man new to the world, could help me not

a whit. "For whom?" I repeated, seeing that he hesitated.

"That is my business," he replied slowly.

"You want to know too much and tell too little," I retorted, yawning.

"And you are playing with me," he cried, looking at me suddenly, with so piercing a gaze and so dark a countenance that I checked a shudder with difficulty. "So much the worse for you, so much the worse for you!" he continued fiercely. "I am here to buy the information you hold; but if you will not sell, there is another way. At an hour's notice I can ruin your plans, and send you to a dungeon! You are like a fish caught in a net not yet drawn. It thrusts its nose this way and that, and touches the mesh, but is slow to take the alarm until the net is drawn—and then it is too late. So it is with you; and so it is," he added, falling into the ecstatic mood which marked him at times, and left me in doubt whether he were all knave or in part enthusiast, "with

all those who set themselves against St. Peter and his Church!"

"I have heard you say much the same of the King of France," I said derisively.

"You trust in him?" he retorted, his eyes gleaming. "You have been up there, and seen his crowded chamber, and counted his forty-five gentlemen and his grey-coated Swiss? I tell you the splendour you saw was a dream, and will vanish as a dream. The man's strength and his glory shall go from him, and that soon. Have you no eyes to see that he is beside the question? There are but two powers in France—the Holy Union, which still prevails, and the accursed Huguenot; and between them is the battle."

"Now you are telling me more," I said.

He grew sober in a moment, looking at me with a vicious anger hard to describe.

"Tut, tut," he said, showing his yellow teeth, "the dead tell no tales. And for Henry of Valois, he so loves a monk that you might better accuse his mistress. But for you, I

have only to cry 'Ho! a Huguenot and a spy!' and though he loved you more than he loved Quelus or Maugiron, he dare not stretch out a finger to save you."

I knew that he spoke the truth, and with difficulty maintained the air of indifference with which I had entered on the interview.

"But what if I leave Blois?" I ventured, merely to see what he would say.

"You cannot," he answered. "The net is round you, M. de Marsac, and there are those at every gate who know you and have their instructions. I can destroy you; but I would fain have your information, and for that I will pay you five hundred crowns and let you go."

"To fall into the hands of the King of Navarre?"

"He will disown you in any case," he answered eagerly. "He had that in his mind, my friend, when he selected an agent so obscure. He will disown you. Ah, mon Dieu! had I been an hour quicker I had caught Rosny—Rosny himself!"

"There is one thing lacking still," I replied. "How am I to be sure that, when I have told you what I know, you will pay me the money and let me go?"

"I will swear to it!" he answered earnestly, deceived into thinking I was about to surrender. "I will give you my oath, M. de Marsac!"

"I would as soon have your shoe-lace!" I exclaimed, the indignation I could not entirely repress finding vent in that phrase. "A churchman's vow is worth a candle—or a candle and a half, is it?" I continued ironically. "I must have some security a great deal more substantial than that, father."

"What?" he asked, looking at me gloomily.

Seeing an opening, I cudgelled my brains to think of any condition which, being fulfilled, might turn the table on him and place him in my power. But his position was so strong, or my wits so weak, that nothing occurred to me at the time; and I sat looking at him, my mind gradually passing from the possibility of

escape to the actual danger in which I stood, and which encompassed also Simon Fleix, and, in a degree, doubtless, M. de Rambouillet. In four or five days, too, Mademoiselle de la Vire would arrive. I wondered if I could send any warning to her; and then, again, I doubted the wisdom of interfering with M. de Rosny's plans, the more as Maignan, who had gone to fetch Mademoiselle, was of a kind to disregard any orders save his master's.

"Well!" said the monk, impatiently recalling me to myself, "what security do you want?"

"I am not quite sure at this moment," I made answer slowly. "I am in a difficult position. I must have some time to consider."

"And to rid yourself of me, if it be possible," he said with irony. "I quite understand. But I warn you that you are watched; and that wherever you go and whatever you do, eyes which are mine are upon you."

"I, too, understand," I said coolly.

He stood awhile uncertain, regarding me

with mingled doubt and malevolence, tortured on the one hand by fear of losing the prize if he granted delay, on the other of failing as utterly if he exerted his power and did not succeed in subduing my resolution. I watched him, too, and gauging his eagerness and the value of the stake for which he was striving by the strength of his emotions, drew small comfort from the sight. More than once it had occurred to me, and now it occurred to me again, to extricate myself by a blow. But a natural reluctance to strike an unarmed man, however vile and knavish, and the belief that he had not trusted himself in my power without taking the fullest precautions, withheld me. When he grudgingly, and with many dark threats, proposed to wait three days—and not an hour more—for my answer, I accepted; for I saw no other alternative open. And on these terms, but not without some short discussion, we parted; and I heard his stealthy footstep go sneaking down the stairs.

CHAPTER XIX.

MEN CALL IT CHANCE.

If I were telling more than the truth, or had it in my mind to embellish my adventures, I could, doubtless, by the exercise of a little ingenuity, make it appear that I owed my escape from Father Antoine's meshes to my own craft; and tell, in fine, as pretty a story of plots and counterplots as M. de Brantôme has ever woven. Having no desire, however, to magnify myself, and, at this time of day scarcely any reason, I am fain to confess that the reverse was the case; and that while no man ever did less to free himself than I did, my adversary retained his grasp to the end, and had surely, but for a strange interposition, effected my ruin. How relief came, and from what quarter, I might defy the most ingenious person, after reading my memoirs to this

point, to say; and this not so much by reason of any subtle device, as because the hand of Providence was for once directly manifest.

The three days of grace which the priest had granted I passed in anxious but futile search for some means of escape, every plan I conceived dying stillborn, and not the least of my miseries lying in the fact that I could discern no better course than to sit still and think, and seemed doomed to perpetual inaction. M. de Rambouillet being a strict Catholic, though in all other respects a patriotic man, I knew better than to have recourse to him; and the priest's influence over M. d'Agen I had myself witnessed. For similar reasons I rejected the idea of applying to the king; and this exhausting the list of those on whom I had any claim, I found myself thrown on my own resources, which seemed limited,—my wits failing me at this pinch,—to my sword and Simon Fleix.

Assured that I must break out of Blois if I would save, not myself only, but others more

precious because entrusted to my charge, I thought it no disgrace to appeal to Simon; describing in a lively fashion the danger which threatened us, and inciting the lad, by every argument which I thought likely to have weight with him, to devise some way of escape.

"Now is the time, my friend," I said, "to show your wits, and prove that M. de Rosny, who said you had a cunning above the ordinary, was right. If your brain can ever save your head, now is the time! For I tell you plainly, if you cannot find some way to outmanœuvre this villain before to-morrow, I am spent. You can judge for yourself what chance you will have of going free."

I paused at that, waiting for him to make some suggestion. To my chagrin he remained silent, leaning his head on his hand, and studying the table with his eyes in a sullen fashion; so that I began to regret the condescension I had evinced in letting him be seated, and found it necessary to remind him

that he had taken service with me, and must do my bidding.

"Well," he said morosely, and without looking up, "I am ready to do it. But I do not like priests, and this one least of all. I know him, and I will not meddle with him!"

"You will not meddle with him?" I cried, almost beside myself with dismay.

"No, I won't," he replied, retaining his listless attitude. "I know him, and I am afraid of him. I am no match for him."

"Then M. de Rosny was wrong, was he?" I said, giving way to my anger.

"If it please you," he answered pertly.

This was too much for me. My riding-switch lay handy, and I snatched it up. Before he knew what I would be at, I fell upon him, and gave him such a sound wholesome drubbing as speedily brought him to his senses. When he cried for mercy,—which he did not for a good space, being still possessed by the peevish devil which had ridden him ever since his departure from Rosny,—I put it to him

again whether M. de Rosny was not right. When he at last admitted this, but not till then, I threw the whip away and let him go, but did not cease to reproach him as he deserved.

"Did you think," I said, "that I was going to be ruined because you would not use your lazy brains? That I was going to sit still, and let you sulk, while Mademoiselle walked blindfold into the toils? Not at all, my friend!"

"Mademoiselle!" he exclaimed, looking at me with a sudden change of countenance, and ceasing to rub himself and scowl, as he had been doing. "She is not here, and is in no danger."

"She will be here to-morrow, or the next day," I said.

"You do not tell me that!" he replied, his eyes glittering. "Does Father Antoine know it?"

"He will know it the moment she enters the town," I answered.

Noting the change which the introduction of Mademoiselle's name into the affair had wrought in him, I felt something like humiliation. But at the moment I had no choice; it was my business to use such instruments as came to my hand, and not—Mademoiselle's safety being at stake—to pick and choose too nicely. In a few minutes our positions were reversed. The lad had grown as hot as I cold, as keenly excited as I critical. When he presently came to a stand in front of me, I saw a strange likeness between his face and the priest's; nor was I astonished when he presently made just such a proposal as I should have expected from Father Antoine himself.

"There is only one thing for it," he muttered, trembling all over. "He must be got rid of!"

"Fine talking!" I said contemptuously. "If he were a soldier he might be brought to it. But he is a priest, my friend, and does not fight."

"Fight? Who wants him to fight?" the lad answered, his face dark, his hands moving restlessly. "It is the easier done. A blow in the back, and he will trouble us no more."

"Who is to strike it?" I asked drily.

Simon trembled and hesitated; but presently, heaving a deep sigh, he said, "I will".

"It might not be difficult," I muttered, thinking it over.

"It would be easy," he answered under his breath. His eyes shone, his lips were white, and his long dark hair hung wet over his forehead.

I reflected; and the longer I did so the more feasible seemed the suggestion. A single word, and I might sweep from my path the man whose existence threatened mine; who would not meet me fairly, but, working against me darkly and treacherously, deserved no better treatment at my hands than that which a detected spy receives. He had wronged my mother; he would fain destroy my friends!

And, doubtless, I shall be blamed by some and ridiculed by more for indulging in scruples at such a time. But I have all my life long been prejudiced against that form of underhand violence which I have heard old men contend came into fashion in our country in modern times, and which certainly seems to be alien to the French character. Without judging others too harshly, or saying that the poniard is never excusable—for then might some wrongs done to women and the helpless go without remedy—I have set my face against its use as unworthy of a soldier. At the time, moreover, of which I am now writing, the extent to which our enemies had lately resorted to it tended to fix this feeling with peculiar firmness in my mind; and, but for the very desperate dilemma in which I stood at the moment—and not I alone—I do not think I should have entertained Simon's proposal for a minute.

As it was, I presently answered him in a way which left him in no doubt of my senti-

ments. "Simon, my friend," I said—and I remember I was a little moved—"you have something still to learn, both as a soldier and a Huguenot. Neither the one nor the other strikes at the back."

"But if he will not fight?" the lad retorted rebelliously. "What then?"

It was so clear that our adversary gained an unfair advantage in this way that I could not answer the question. I let it pass, therefore, and merely repeating my former injunction, bade Simon think out another way.

He promised reluctantly to do so, and, after spending some moments in thought, went out to learn whether the house was being watched.

When he returned, his countenance wore so new an expression that I saw at once that something had happened. He did not meet my eye, however, and did not explain, but made as if he would go out again, with something of confusion in his manner. Before finally disappearing, however, he seemed to change his mind once more; for, marching up

to me where I stood eyeing him with the utmost astonishment, he stopped before me, and suddenly drawing out his hand, thrust something into mine.

"What is it, man?" I said mechanically.

"Look!" he answered rudely, breaking silence for the first time. "You should know. Why ask me? What have I to do with it?"

I looked then, and saw that he had given me a knot of velvet precisely similar in shape, size, and material to that well-remembered one which had aided me so opportunely in my search for Mademoiselle. This differed from that a little in colour, but in nothing else, the fashion of the bow being the same, and one lappet bearing the initials "C. d. l. V.," while the other had the words, "A moi". I gazed at it in wonder. "But, Simon," I said, "what does it mean? Where did you get it?"

"Where should I get it?" he answered jealously. Then, seeming to recollect himself, he changed his tone. "A woman gave it to me in the street," he said.

I asked him what woman.

"How should I know?" he answered, his eyes gleaming with anger. "It was a woman in a mask."

"Was it Fanchette?" I said sternly.

"It might have been. I do not know," he responded.

I concluded at first that Mademoiselle and her escort had arrived in the outskirts of the city, and that Maignan had justified his reputation for discretion by sending in to learn from me whether the way was clear before he entered. In this notion I was partly confirmed and partly shaken by the accompanying message; which Simon, from whom every scrap of information had to be dragged as blood from a stone, presently delivered.

"You are to meet the sender half an hour after sunset to-morrow evening," he said, "on the Parvis at the north-east corner of the Cathedral."

"To-morrow evening?"

"Yes, when else?" the lad answered ungraciously. "I said to-morrow evening."

I thought this strange. I could understand why Maignan should prefer to keep his charge outside the walls until he heard from me, but not why he should postpone a meeting so long. The message, too, seemed unnecessarily meagre, and I began to think Simon was still withholding something.

"Was that all?" I asked him.

"Yes, all," he answered, "except ——"

"Except what?" I said sternly.

"Except that the woman showed me the gold token Mademoiselle de la Vire used to carry," he answered reluctantly, "and said, if you wanted further assurance that would satisfy you."

"Did you see the coin?" I cried eagerly.

"To be sure," he answered.

"Then, mon Dieu!" I retorted, "either you are deceiving me, or the woman you saw deceived you. For Mademoiselle has not got the token! I have it; here, in my possession; Now, do you still say you saw it, man?"

"I saw one like it," he answered trembling, his face damp. "That I will swear. And the woman told me what I have told you. And no more."

"Then it is clear," I answered, "that Mademoiselle has nothing to do with this, and is doubtless many a league away. This is one of M. de Bruhl's tricks. Fresnoy gave him the token he stole from me. And I told him the story of the velvet knot myself. This is a trap; and had I fallen into it, and gone to the Parvis to-morrow evening, I had never kept another assignation, my lad."

Simon looked thoughtful. Presently he said, with a crestfallen air: "You were to go alone. The woman said that."

Though I knew well why he had suppressed this item, I forbore to blame him. "What was the woman like?" I said.

"She had very much of Fanchette's figure," he answered. He could not go beyond that. Blinded by the idea that the woman was Mademoiselle's attendant, and no one else, he

had taken little heed of her, and could not even say for certain that she was not a man in woman's clothes.

I thought the matter over and discussed it with him; and was heartily minded to punish M. de Bruhl, if I could discover a way of turning his treacherous plot against himself. But the lack of any precise knowledge of his plans prevented me stirring in the matter; the more as I felt no certainty that I should be master of my actions when the time came.

Strange to say, the discovery of this movement on the part of Bruhl, who had sedulously kept himself in the background since the scene in the king's presence, far from increasing my anxieties, had the effect of administering a fillip to my spirits; which the cold and unyielding pressure of the Jacobin had reduced to a low point. Here was something I could understand, resist, and guard against. The feeling that I had once more to do with a man of like aims and passions with myself quickly restored me to the use of my faculties; as I

have heard that a swordsman opposed to the powers of evil regains his vigour on finding himself engaged with a mortal foe. Though I knew that the hours of grace were fast running to a close, and that on the morrow the priest would call for an answer, I experienced that evening an unreasonable lightness and cheerfulness. I retired to rest with confidence, and slept in comfort, supported in part, perhaps, by the assurance that in that room where my mother died her persecutor could have no power to harm me.

Upon Simon Fleix, on the other hand, the discovery that Bruhl was moving, and that consequently peril threatened us from a new quarter, had a different effect. He fell into a state of extreme excitement, and spent the evening and a great part of the night in walking restlessly up and down the room, wrestling with the fears and anxieties which beset us, and now talking fast to himself, now biting his nails in an agony of impatience. In vain I adjured him not to meet troubles

halfway; or, pointing to the pallet which he occupied at the foot of my couch, bade him, if he could not devise a way of escape, at least to let the matter rest until morning. He had no power to obey, but, tortured by the vivid anticipations which it was his nature to entertain, he continued to ramble to and fro in a fever of the nerves, and had no sooner lain down than he was up again. Remembering, however, how well he had borne himself on the night of Mademoiselle's escape from Blois, I refrained from calling him a coward; and contented myself instead with the reflection that nothing sits worse on a fighting-man than too much knowledge—except, perhaps, a lively imagination.

I thought it possible that Mademoiselle might arrive next day before Father Antoine called to receive his answer. In this event I hoped to have the support of Maignan's experience. But the party did not arrive. I had to rely on myself and my own resources, and, this being so, determined to refuse the

priest's offer, but in all other things to be guided by circumstances.

About noon he came, attended, as was his practice, by two friends, whom he left outside. He looked paler and more shadowy than before, I thought, his hands thinner, and his cheeks more transparent. I could draw no good augury, however, from these signs of frailty, for the brightness of his eyes and the unusual elation of his manner told plainly of a spirit assured of the mastery. He entered the room with an air of confidence, and addressed me in a tone of patronage which left me in no doubt of his intentions; the frankness with which he now laid bare his plans going far to prove that already he considered me no better than his tool.

I did not at once undeceive him, but allowed him to proceed, and even to bring out the five hundred crowns which he had promised me, and the sight of which he doubtless supposed would clench the matter.

Seeing this he became still less reticent,

and spoke so largely that I presently felt myself impelled to ask him if he would answer a question.

"That is as it may be, M. de Marsac," he answered lightly. "You may ask it."

"You hint at great schemes which you have in hand, father," I said. "You speak of France and Spain and Navarre, and kings and leagues and cardinals! You talk of secret strings, and would have me believe that if I comply with your wishes I shall find you as powerful a patron as M. de Rosny. But —one moment, if you please," I continued hastily, seeing that he was about to interrupt me with such eager assurances as I had already heard; "tell me this. With so many irons in the fire, why did you interfere with one old gentlewoman—for the sake of a few crowns?"

"I will tell you even that," he answered, his face flushing at my tone. "Have you ever heard of an elephant? Yes. Well, it has a trunk, you know, with which it can

either drag an oak from the earth or lift a groat from the ground. It is so with me. But again you ask," he continued with an airy grimace, "why I wanted a few crowns. Enough that I did. There are going to be two things in the world, and two only, M. de Marsac: brains and money. The former I have, and had: the latter I needed—and took."

"Money and brains?" I said, looking at him thoughtfully.

"Yes," he answered, his eyes sparkling, his thin nostrils beginning to dilate. "Give me these two, and I will rule France!"

"You will rule France?" I exclaimed, amazed beyond measure by his audacity. "You, man?"

"Yes, I," he answered, with abominable coolness. "I, priest, monk, churchman, clerk. You look surprised, but mark you, sir, there is a change going on. Our time is coming, and yours is going. What hampers our lord the king and shuts him up in Blois, while rebellions stalk through France? Lack of

men? No; but lack of money. Who can get the money for him—you the soldier, or I the clerk? A thousand times, I! Therefore, my time is coming, and before you die you will see a priest rule France."

"God forbid it should be you," I answered scornfully.

"As you please," he answered, shrugging his shoulders, and assuming in a breath a mask of humility which sat as ill on his monstrous conceit as ever nun's veil on a trooper. "Yet it may even be I; by the favour of the Holy Catholic Church, whose humble minister I am."

I sprang up with a great oath at that, having no stomach for more of the strange transformations in which this man delighted, and whereof the last had ever the air of being the most hateful. "You villain!" I cried, twisting my moustaches, a habit I have when enraged. "And so you would make me a stepping-stone to your greatness? You would bribe me—a soldier and a gentleman? Go

before I do you a mischief. That is all I have to say to you. Go! You have your answer. I will tell you nothing—not a jot or a tittle. Begone from my room!"

He fell back a step in his surprise, and stood against the table biting his nails and scowling at me, fear and chagrin contending with half-a-dozen devils for the possession of his face. "So you have been deceiving me!" he said slowly, and at last.

"I have let you deceive yourself," I answered, looking at him with scorn, but with none of the fear with which he had for a while inspired me. "Begone, and do your worst."

"You know what you are doing," he said. "I have that will hang you, M. de Marsac—or worse."

"Go!" I cried.

"You have thought of your friends," he continued mockingly.

"Go!" I said.

"Of Mademoiselle de la Vire, if by any chance she fall into my hands? It will not be

hanging for her. You remember the two Foucauds?"—and he laughed.

The vile threat, which I knew he had used to my mother, so worked upon me that I strode forward unable to control myself longer. In another moment I had certainly taken him by the throat and squeezed the life out of his miserable carcase, had not Providence in its goodness intervened to save me. The door, on which he had already laid his hand in terror, opened suddenly. It admitted Simon, who, closing it behind him, stood looking from one to the other of us in nervous doubt; divided between that respect for the priest which a training at the Sorbonne had instilled into him, and the rage which despair arouses in the weakest.

His presence, while it checked me in my purpose, seemed to give Father Antoine courage; for the priest stood his ground, and even turned to me a second time, his face dark with spite and disappointment. "Good," he said hoarsely. "Destroy yourself if you will!

I advise you to bar your door, for in an hour the guards will be here to fetch you to the question."

Simon cried out at the threat, so that I turned and looked at the lad. His knees were shaking, his hair stood on end.

The priest saw his terror and his own opportunity. "Ay, in an hour," he continued slowly, looking at him with cruel eyes. "In an hour, lad! You must be fond of pain to court it, and out of humour with life to throw it away. Or stay," he continued abruptly, after considering Simon's agony for a moment, and doubtless deducing from it a last hope, "I will be merciful. I will give you one more chance."

"And yourself?" I said with a sneer.

"As you please," he answered, declining to be diverted from the trembling lad, whom his gaze seemed to fascinate. "I will give you until half an hour after sunset this evening to reconsider the matter. If you make up your minds to accept my terms, meet me then. I

leave to-night for Paris, and I will give you until the last moment. But," he continued grimly, "if you do not meet me, or, meeting me, remain obstinate— God do so to me, and more also, if you see the sun rise thrice."

Some impulse, I know not what, seeing that I had no thought of accepting his terms or meeting him, led me to ask briefly, "Where?"

"On the Parvis of the Cathedral," he answered after a moment's calculation. "At the north-east corner, half an hour after sunset. It is a quiet spot."

Simon uttered a stifled exclamation. And then for a moment there was silence in the room, while the lad breathed hard and irregularly, and I stood rooted to the spot, looking so long and so strangely at the priest that Father Antoine laid his hand again on the door and glanced uneasily behind him. Nor was he content until he had hit on, as he fancied, the cause of my strange regard.

"Ha!" he said, his thin lip curling in conceit at his astuteness, "I understand. You think to kill me to-night? Let me tell you, this house is watched. If you leave here to meet me with any companion—unless it be M. d'Agen, whom I can trust—I shall be warned, and be gone before you reach the rendezvous. And gone, mind you," he added, with a grim smile, "to sign your death-warrant."

He went out with that, closing the door behind him; and we heard his step go softly down the staircase. I gazed at Simon, and he at me, with all the astonishment and awe which it was natural we should feel in presence of so remarkable a coincidence.

For by a marvel the priest had named the same spot and the same time as the sender of the velvet knot!

"He will go," Simon said, his face flushed and his voice trembling, "and they will go."

"And in the dark they will not know him,"

I muttered. "He is about my height. They will take him for me!"

"And kill him!" Simon cried hysterically. "They will kill him! He goes to his death, monsieur. It is the finger of God."

CHAPTER XX.

THE KING'S FACE.

It seemed so necessary to bring home the crime to Bruhl should the priest really perish in the trap laid for me, that I came near to falling into one of those mistakes to which men of action are prone. For my first impulse was to follow the priest to the Parvis, closely enough, if possible, to detect the assassins in the act, and with sufficient force, if I could muster it, to arrest them. The credit of dissuading me from this course lies with Simon, who pointed out its dangers in so convincing a manner that I was brought with little difficulty to relinquish it.

Instead, acting on his advice, I sent him to M. d'Agen's lodging, to beg that young gentleman to call upon me before evening. After searching the lodging and other places in vain,

Simon found M. d'Agen in the tennis-court at the Castle, and, inventing a crafty excuse, brought him to my lodging a full hour before the time.

My visitor was naturally surprised to find that I had nothing particular to say to him. I dared not tell him what occupied my thoughts, and for the rest invention failed me. But his gaiety and those pretty affectations on which he spent an infinity of pains, for the purpose, apparently, of hiding the sterling worth of a character deficient neither in courage nor backbone, were united to much good nature. Believing at last that I had sent for him in a fit of the vapours, he devoted himself to amusing me and abusing Bruhl—a very favourite pastime with him. And in this way he made out a call of two hours.

I had not long to wait for proof of Simon's wisdom in taking this precaution. We thought it prudent to keep within doors after our guest's departure, and so passed the night in

ignorance whether anything had happened or not. But about seven next morning one of the Marquis's servants, despatched by M. d'Agen, burst in upon us with the news, which was no news from the moment his hurried footstep sounded on the stairs, that Father Antoine had been set upon and killed the previous evening!

I heard this confirmation of my hopes with grave thankfulness; Simon with so much emotion that when the messenger was gone he sat down on a stool and began to sob and tremble as if he had lost his mother, instead of a mortal foe. I took advantage of the occasion to read him a sermon on the end of crooked courses; nor could I myself recall without a shudder the man's last words to me; or the lawless and evil designs in which he had rejoiced, while standing on the very brink of the pit which was to swallow up both him and them in everlasting darkness.

Naturally, the uppermost feeling in my mind was relief. I was free once more. In

all probability the priest had kept his knowledge to himself, and without him his agents would be powerless. Simon, it is true, heard that the town was much excited by the event; and that many attributed it to the Huguenots. But we did not suffer ourselves to be depressed by this, nor had I any foreboding until the sound of a second hurried footstep mounting the stairs reached our ears.

I knew the step in a moment for M. d'Agen's, and something ominous in its ring brought me to my feet before he opened the door. Significant as was his first hasty look round the room, he recovered at sight of me all his habitual *sang-froid*. He saluted me, and spoke coolly, though rapidly. But he panted, and I noticed in a moment that he had lost his lisp.

"I am happy in finding you," he said, closing the door carefully behind him, "for I am the bearer of ill news, and there is not a moment to be lost. The king has signed an order for your instant consignment to prison,

M. de Marsac, and, once there, it is difficult to say what may not happen."

"My consignment?" I exclaimed. I may be pardoned if the news for a moment found me unprepared.

"Yes," he replied quickly. "The king has signed it at the instance of Marshal Retz."

"But for what?" I cried in amazement.

"The murder of Father Antoine. You will pardon me," he continued urgently, "but this is no time for words. The Provost-Marshal is even now on his way to arrest you. Your only hope is to evade him, and gain an audience of the king. I have persuaded my uncle to go with you, and he is waiting at his lodgings. There is not a moment to be lost, however, if you would reach the king's presence before you are arrested."

"But I am innocent!" I cried.

"I know it," M. d'Agen answered, "and can prove it. But if you cannot get speech of the king your innocence will avail you nothing. You have powerful enemies. Come

without more ado, M. de Marsac, I pray," he added.

His manner, even more than his words, impressed me with a sense of urgency; and postponing for a time my own judgment, I hurriedly thanked him for his friendly offices. Snatching up my sword, which lay on a chair, I buckled it on; for Simon's fingers trembled so violently he could give me no help. This done I nodded to M. d'Agen to go first, and followed him from the room, Simon attending us of his own motion. It would be then about eleven o'clock in the forenoon.

My companion ran down the stairs without ceremony, and so quickly it was all I could do to keep up with him. At the outer door he signed to me to stand, and darting himself into the street, he looked anxiously in the direction of the Rue St. Denys. Fortunately the coast was still clear, and he beckoned to me to follow him. I did so, and starting to walk in the opposite direction as fast as we

could, in less than a minute we had put a corner between us and the house.

Our hopes of escaping unseen, however, were promptly dashed. The house, I have said, stood in a quiet by-street, which was bounded on the farther side by a garden-wall buttressed at intervals. We had scarcely gone a dozen paces from my door when a man slipped from the shelter of one of these buttresses, and after a single glance at us, set off to run towards the Rue St. Denys.

M. d'Agen looked back and nodded. "There goes the news," he said. "They will try to cut us off, but I think we have the start of them."

I made no reply, feeling that I had resigned myself entirely into his hands. But as we passed through the Rue de Valois, in part of which a market was held at this hour, attracting a considerable concourse of peasants and others, I fancied I detected signs of unusual bustle and excitement. It seemed unlikely that the news of the priest's murder should

affect so many people and to such a degree, and I asked M. d'Agen what it meant.

"There is a rumour abroad," he answered, without slackening speed, "that the king intends to move south to Tours at once."

I muttered my surprise and satisfaction. "He will come to terms with the Huguenots then?" I said.

"It looks like it," M. d'Agen rejoined. "Retz's party are in an ill humour on that account, and will wreak it on you if they get a chance. On guard!" he added abruptly. "Here are two of them!"

As he spoke we emerged from the crowd, and I saw, half-a-dozen paces in front of us, and coming to meet us, a couple of Court gallants, attended by as many servants. They espied us at the same moment, and came across the street, which was tolerably wide at that part, with the evident intention of stopping us. Simultaneously, however, we crossed to take their side, and so met them face to face in the middle of the way.

"M. d'Agen," the foremost exclaimed, speaking in a haughty tone, and with a dark side glance at me, "I am sorry to see you in such company! Doubtless you are not aware that this gentleman is the subject of an order which has even now been issued to the Provost-Marshal."

"And if so, sir? What of that?" my companion lisped in his silkiest tone.

"What of that?" the other cried, frowning and pushing slightly forward.

"Precisely," M. d'Agen repeated, laying his hand on his hilt and declining to give back. "I am not aware that his Majesty has appointed you Provost-Marshal; or that you have any warrant, M. Villequier, empowering you to stop gentlemen in the public streets."

M. Villequier reddened with anger. "You are young, M. d'Agen," he said, his voice quivering, "or I would make you pay dearly for that!"

"My friend is not young," M. d'Agen retorted, bowing. "He is a gentleman of birth,

M. Villequier; by repute, as I learned yesterday, one of the best swordsmen in France, and no Gascon. If you feel inclined to arrest him, do so, I pray. And I will have the honour of engaging your son."

As we had all this time our hands on our swords, there needed but a blow to bring about one of those street brawls which were more common then than now. A number of market-people, drawn to the spot by our raised voices, had gathered round, and were waiting eagerly to see what would happen. But Villequier, as my companion perhaps knew, was a Gascon in heart as well as by birth, and seeing our determined aspects, thought better of it. Shrugging his shoulders with an affectation of disdain which imposed on no one, he signalled to his servants to go on, and himself stood aside.

"I thank you for your polite offer," he said with an evil smile, "and will remember it. But as you say, sir, I am not the Provost-Marshal."

Paying little heed to his words, we bowed, passed him, and hurried on. But the peril was not over. Not only had the *rencontre* cost us some precious minutes, but the Gascon, after letting us proceed a little way, followed us. And word being passed by his servants, as we supposed, that one of us was the murderer of Father Antoine, the rumour spread through the crowd like wildfire, and in a few moments we found ourselves attended by a troop of *canaille*, who, hanging on our skirts, caused Simon Fleix no little apprehension. Notwithstanding the contempt which M. d'Agen, whose bearing throughout was admirable, expressed for them, we might have found it necessary to turn and teach them a lesson had we not reached M. de Rambouillet's in the nick of time; where we found the door surrounded by half-a-dozen armed servants, at sight of whom our persecutors fell back with the cowardice which is usually found in that class.

If I had been tempted of late to think

M. de Rambouillet fickle, I had no reason to complain now; whether his attitude was due to M. d'Agen's representations, or to the reflection that without me the plans he had at heart must miscarry. I found him waiting within, attended by three gentlemen, all cloaked and ready for the road; while the air of purpose which sat on his brow indicated that he thought the crisis no common one. Not a moment was lost, even in explanations. Waving me to the door again, and exchanging a few sentences with his nephew, he gave the word to start, and we issued from the house in a body. Doubtless the fact that those who sought to ruin me were his political enemies had some weight with him; for I saw his face harden as his eyes met those of M. de Villequier, who passed slowly before the door as we came out. The Gascon, however, was not the man to interfere with so large a party, and dropped back; while M. de Rambouillet, after exchanging a cold salute with him, led the way towards the Castle at

a round pace. His nephew and I walked one on either side of him, and the others, to the number of ten or eleven, pressed on behind in a compact body, our cortége presenting so determined a front that the crowd, which had remained hanging about the door, fled every way. Even some peaceable folk who found themselves in our road took the precaution of slipping into doorways, or stood aside to give us the full width of the street.

I remarked—and I think it increased my anxiety—that our leader was dressed with more than usual care and richness, but, unlike his attendants, wore no arms. He took occasion, as we hurried along, to give me a word of advice. "M. de Marsac," he said, looking at me suddenly, "my nephew has given me to understand that you place yourself entirely in my hands."

I replied that I asked for no better fortune, and, whatever the event, thanked him from the bottom of my heart.

"Be pleased then to keep silence until I

bid you speak," he replied sharply; for he was one of those whom a sudden stress sours and exacerbates. "And, above all, no violence without my orders. We are about to fight a battle, and a critical one, but it must be won with our heads. If we can we will keep you out of the Provost-Marshal's hands."

And if not? I remembered the threats Father Antoine had used, and in a moment I lost sight of the street with all its light and life and movement. I felt no longer the wholesome stinging of the wind. I tasted instead a fetid air, and saw round me a narrow cell and masked figures, and in particular a swarthy man in a leather apron leaning over a brazier, from which came lurid flames. And I was bound. I experienced that utter helplessness which is the last test of courage. The man came forward, and then—then, thank God! the vision passed away. An exclamation to which M. d'Agen gave vent brought me back to the present, and to the blessed knowledge that the fight was not yet over.

We were within a score of paces, I found, of the Castle gates; but so were also a second party, who had just debouched from a side-street, and now hurried on, pace for pace, with us, with the evident intention of forestalling us. The race ended in both companies reaching the entrance at the same time, with the consequence of some jostling taking place among the servants. This must have led to blows but for the strenuous commands which M. de Rambouillet had laid upon his followers. I found myself in a moment confronted by a row of scowling faces, while a dozen threatening hands were stretched out towards me, and as many voices, among which I recognised Fresnoy's, cried out tumultuously, "That is he! That is the one!"

An elderly man in a quaint dress stepped forward, a paper in his hand, and, backed as he was by half-a-dozen halberdiers, would in a moment have laid hands on me if M. de Rambouillet had not intervened with a negligent air of authority, which sat on him the

more gracefully as he held nothing but a riding-switch in his hands. "Tut, tut! What is this?" he said lightly. "I am not wont to have my people interfered with, M. Provost, without my leave. You know me, I suppose?"

"Perfectly, M. le Marquis," the man answered with dogged respect; "but this is by the king's special command."

"Very good," my patron answered, quietly eyeing the faces behind the Provost-Marshal, as if he were making a note of them; which caused some of the gentlemen manifest uneasiness. "That is soon seen, for we are even now about to seek speech with his Majesty."

"Not this gentleman," the Provost-Marshal answered firmly, raising his hand again. "I cannot let him pass."

"Yes, this gentleman too, by your leave," the Marquis retorted, lightly putting the hand aside with his cane.

"Sir," said the other, retreating a step, and speaking with some heat, "This is no jest, with

all respect. I hold the king's own order, and it may not be resisted."

The nobleman tapped his silver comfit-box and smiled. "I shall be the last to resist it —if you have it," he said languidly.

"You may read it for yourself," the Provost-Marshal answered, his patience exhausted.

M. de Rambouillet took the parchment with the ends of his fingers, glanced at it, and gave it back. "As I thought," he said, "a manifest forgery."

"A forgery!" cried the officer, crimson with indignation. "And I had it from the hands of the king's own secretary!" At this those behind murmured, some "Shame," and some one thing, and some another—all with an air so threatening that the Marquis's gentlemen closed up behind him, and M. d'Agen laughed rudely.

But M. de Rambouillet remained unmoved. "You may have had it from whom you please, sir," he said. "It is a forgery, and I shall resist its execution. If you choose to await me here,

I will give you my word to render this gentleman to you within an hour, should the order hold good. If you will not wait, I shall command my servants to clear the way, and if ill happen, then the responsibility will lie with you."

He spoke in so resolute a manner it was not difficult to see that something more was at stake than the arrest of a single man. This was so; the real issue was whether the king, with whose instability it was difficult to cope, should fall back into the hands of his old advisers or not. My arrest was a move in the game intended as a counterblast to the victory which M. de Rambouillet had gained when he persuaded the king to move to Tours; a city in the neighbourhood of the Huguenots, and a place of arms whence union with them would be easy.

The Provost-Marshal could, no doubt, make a shrewd guess at these things. He knew that the order he had would be held valid or not according as one party or the

other gained the mastery; and, seeing M. de Rambouillet's resolute demeanour, he gave way. Rudely interrupted more than once by his attendants, among whom were some of Bruhl's men, he muttered an ungracious assent to our proposal; on which, and without a moment's delay, the Marquis took me by the arm and hurried me across the court-yard.

And so far, well. My heart began to rise. But, for the Marquis, as we mounted the staircase the anxiety he had dissembled while we faced the Provost-Marshal, broke out in angry mutterings; from which I gathered that the crisis was yet to come. I was not surprised, therefore, when an usher rose on our appearance in the antechamber, and, quickly crossing the floor, interposed between us and the door of the chamber, informing the Marquis with a low obeisance that his Majesty was engaged.

"He will see me," M. de Rambouillet cried, looking haughtily round on the sneering pages and lounging courtiers, who grew civil under his eye.

"I have particular orders, sir, to admit no one," the man answered.

"Tut, tut, they do not apply to me," my companion retorted, nothing daunted. "I know the business on which the king is engaged, and I am here to assist him." And raising his hand he thrust the startled official aside, and hardily pushed the doors of the chamber open.

The king, surrounded by half-a-dozen persons, was in the act of putting on his riding boots. On hearing us, he turned his head with a startled air, and dropped in his confusion one of the ivory cylinders he was using; while his aspect, and that of the persons who stood around him, reminded me irresistibly of a party of schoolboys detected in a fault.

He recovered himself, it is true, almost immediately, and turning his back to us, continued to talk to the persons round him on such trifling subjects as commonly engaged him. He carried on this conversation in a

very free way, studiously ignoring our presence; but it was plain he remained aware of it, and even that he was uneasy under the cold and severe gaze which the Marquis, who seemed in nowise affrighted at his reception, bent upon him.

I, for my part, had no longer any confidence. Nay, I came near to regretting that I had persevered in an attempt so useless. The warrant which awaited me at the gates seemed less formidable than his Majesty's growing displeasure; which I saw I was incurring by remaining where I was. It needed not the insolent glance of Marshal Retz, who lounged smiling by the king's hand, or the laughter of a couple of pages who stood at the head of the chamber, to deprive me of my last hope; while some things which might have cheered me—the uneasiness of some about the king, and the disquietude which underlay Marshal Retz's manner—escaped my notice altogether.

What I did see clearly was that the king's

embarrassment was fast changing to anger. The paint which reddened his cheeks prevented any alteration in his colour being visible, but his frown and the nervous manner in which he kept taking off and putting on his jewelled cap betrayed him. At length, signing to one of his companions to follow, he moved a little aside to a window, whence, after a few moments, the gentleman came to us.

"M. de Rambouillet," he said, speaking coldly and formally, "his Majesty is displeased by this gentleman's presence, and requires him to withdraw forthwith."

"His Majesty's word is law," my patron answered, bowing low, and speaking in a clear voice audible throughout the chamber; "but the matter which brings this gentleman here is of the utmost importance, and touches his Majesty's person."

M. de Retz laughed jeeringly. The other courtiers looked grave. The king shrugged his shoulders with a peevish gesture; but after a moment's hesitation, during which he

looked first at Retz and then at M. de Rambouillet, he signed to the Marquis to approach.

"Why have you brought him here?" he muttered sharply, looking askance at me. "He should have been bestowed according to my orders."

"He has information for your Majesty's private ear," Rambouillet answered. And he looked so meaningly at the king that Henry, I think, remembered on a sudden his compact with Rosny, and my part in it; for he started with the air of a man suddenly awakened. "To prevent that information reaching you, sire," my patron continued, "his enemies have practised on your Majesty's well-known sense of justice."

"Oh, but stay, stay!" the king cried, hitching forward the scanty cloak he wore, which barely came down to his waist. "The man has killed a priest! He has killed a priest, man!" he repeated with confidence, as if he had now got hold of the right argument.

"That is not so, sire, craving your Majesty's

pardon," M. de Rambouillet replied, with the utmost coolness.

"Tut! tut! The evidence is clear," the king said peevishly.

"As to that, sire," my companion rejoined, "if it is of the murder of Father Antoine he is accused, I say boldly that there is none."

"Then there you are mistaken!" the king answered. "I heard it with my own ears this morning."

"Will you deign, sire, to tell me its nature?" M. de Rambouillet persisted.

But on that Marshal Retz thought it necessary to intervene. "Need we turn his Majesty's chamber into a court of justice?" he said smoothly. Hitherto he had not spoken; trusting, perhaps, to the impression he had already made upon the king.

M. de Rambouillet took no notice of him.

"But Bruhl," said the king, "you see, Bruhl says ——"

"Bruhl!" my companion replied, with so much contempt that Henry started. "Surely

your Majesty has not taken his word against this gentleman, of all people?"

Thus reminded a second time of the interests entrusted to me, and of the advantage which Bruhl would gain by my disappearance, the king looked first confused, and then angry. He vented his passion in one or two profane oaths, with the childish addition that we were all a set of traitors, and that he had no one whom he could trust. But my companion had touched the right chord at last; for when the king grew more composed, he waved aside Marshal Retz's protestations, and sullenly bade Rambouillet say what he had to say.

"The monk was killed, sire, about sunset," he answered. "Now, my nephew, M. d'Agen, is without, and will tell your Majesty that he was with this gentleman at his lodgings from about an hour before sunset last evening until a full hour after. Consequently, M. de Marsac can hardly be the assassin, and M. le Maréchal must look elsewhere if he wants vengeance."

"Justice, sir, not vengeance," Marshal Retz said with a dark glance. His keen Italian face hid his trouble well, but a little pulse of passion beating in his olive cheek betrayed the secret to those who knew him. He had a harder part to play than his opponent; for while Rambouillet's hands were clean, Retz knew himself a traitor, and liable at any moment to discovery and punishment.

"Let M. d'Agen be called," Henry said curtly.

"And if your Majesty pleases," Retz added, "M. de Bruhl also. If you really intend, sire, that is, to reopen a matter which I thought had been settled."

The king nodded obstinately, his face furrowed with ill-temper. He kept his shifty eyes, which seldom met those of the person he addressed, on the floor; and this accentuated the awkward stooping carriage which was natural to him. There were seven or eight dogs of exceeding smallness in the room, and while we waited for the persons who had

been summoned, he kicked now one and now another of the baskets which held them, as if he found in this some vent for his ill-humour.

The witnesses presently appeared, followed by several persons, among whom were the Dukes of Nevers and Mercœur, who came to ride out with the king, and M. de Crillon; so that the chamber grew passably full. The two dukes nodded formally to the Marquis, as they passed him, but entered into a muttered conversation with Retz, who appeared to be urging them to press his cause. They seemed to decline, however, shrugging their short cloaks as if the matter were too insignificant. Crillon on his part cried audibly, and with an oath, to know what the matter was; and being informed, asked whether all this fuss was being made about a d—— shaveling monk.

Henry, whose tenderness for the cowl was well known, darted an angry glance at him, but contented himself with saying sharply to M. d'Agen, "Now, sir, what do you know about the matter?"

"One moment, sire," M. Rambouillet cried, interposing before François could answer. "Craving your Majesty's pardon, you have heard M. de Bruhl's account. May I, as a favour to myself, beg you, sire, to permit us also to hear it?"

"What?" Marshal Retz exclaimed angrily, "are we to be the judges, then, or his Majesty? Armidieu!" he continued hotly, "what, in the fiend's name, have we to do with it? I protest 'fore heaven ——"

"Ay, sir, and what do you protest?" my champion retorted, turning to him with stern disdain.

"Silence!" cried the king, who had listened almost bewildered. "Silence! By God, gentlemen," he continued, his eye travelling round the circle with a sparkle of royal anger in it not unworthy of his crown, "you forget yourselves. I will have none of this quarrelling in my presence or out of it. I lost Quélus and Maugiron that way, and loss enough, and I will have none of it, I say! M. de Bruhl,"

he added, standing erect, and looking for the moment with all his paint and frippery a king, "M. de Bruhl, repeat your story."

The feelings with which I listened to this controversy may be imagined. Devoured in turn by hope and fear as now one side and now the other seemed likely to prevail, I confronted at one moment the gloom of the dungeon, and at another tasted the air of freedom, which had never seemed so sweet before. Strong as these feelings were, however, they gave way to curiosity at this point; when I heard Bruhl called, and saw him come forward at the king's command. Knowing this man to be himself guilty, I marvelled with what face he would present himself before all those eyes, and from what depths of impudence he could draw supplies in such an emergency.

I need not have troubled myself, however, for he was fully equal to the occasion. His high colour and piercing black eyes met the gaze of friend and foe alike without flinching. Dressed well and elegantly, he wore his raven

hair curled in the mode, and looked alike gay, handsome, and imperturbable. If there was a suspicion of coarseness about his bulkier figure, as he stood beside M. d'Agen, who was the courtier perfect and *point devise*, it went to the scale of sincerity, seeing that men naturally associate truth with strength.

"I know no more than this, sire," he said easily; "that, happening to cross the Parvis at the moment of the murder, I heard Father Antoine scream. He uttered four words only, in the tone of a man in mortal peril. They were"—and here the speaker looked for an instant at me—"'Ha! Marsac! A moi!'"

"Indeed!" M. de Rambouillet said, after looking to the king for permission. "And that was all? You saw nothing?"

Bruhl shook his head. "It was too dark," he said.

"And heard no more?"

"No."

"Do I understand, then," the Marquis continued slowly, "that M. de Marsac is arrested

because the priest—God rest his soul!—cried to him for help?"

"For help?" M. de Retz exclaimed fiercely.

"For help?" said the king, surprised. And at that the most ludicrous change fell upon the faces of all. The king looked puzzled, the Duke of Nevers smiled, the Duke of Mercœur laughed aloud. Crillon cried boisterously, "Good hit!" and the majority, who wished no better than to divine the winning party, grinned broadly, whether they would or no.

To Marshal Retz, however, and Bruhl, that which to everyone else seemed an amusing retort had a totally different aspect; while the former turned yellow with chagrin and came near to choking, the latter looked as chapfallen and startled as if his guilt had been that moment brought home to him. Assured by the tone of the monk's voice—which must, indeed, have thundered in his ears—that my name was uttered in denunciation by one who thought me his assailant, he had chosen to tell the truth without reflecting that words,

so plain to him, might bear a different construction when repeated.

"Certainly the words seem ambiguous," Henry muttered.

"But it was Marsac killed him," Retz cried in a rage.

"It is for some evidence of that we are waiting," my champion answered suavely.

The Marshal looked helplessly at Nevers and Mercœur, who commonly took part with him; but apparently those noblemen had not been primed for this occasion. They merely shook their heads and smiled. In the momentary silence which followed, while all looked curiously at Bruhl, who could not conceal his mortification, M. d'Agen stepped forward.

"If your Majesty will permit me," he said, a malicious simper crossing his handsome face —I had often remarked his extreme dislike for Bruhl without understanding it—"I think I can furnish some evidence more to the point than that to which M. de Bruhl has with so much fairness restricted himself." He then

went on to state that he had had the honour of being in my company at the time of the murder; and he added, besides, so many details as to exculpate me to the satisfaction of any candid person.

The king nodded. "That settles the matter," he said, with a sigh of relief. "You think so, Mercœur, do you not? Precisely. Villequier, see that the order respecting M. de Marsac is cancelled."

M. de Retz could not control his wrath on hearing this direction given. "At this rate," he cried recklessly, "we shall have few priests left here! We have got a bad name at Blois, as it is!"

For a moment all in the circle held their breath, while the king's eyes flashed fire at this daring allusion to the murder of the Duke de Guise, and his brother the Cardinal. But it was Henry's misfortune to be ever indulgent in the wrong place, and severe when severity was either unjust or impolitic. He recovered himself with an effort, and revenged himself

only by omitting to invite the Marshal, who was now trembling in his shoes, to join his riding party.

The circle broke up amid some excitement. I stood on one side with M. d'Agen, while the king and his immediate following passed out, and, greatly embarrassed as I was by the civil congratulating of many who would have seen me hang with equal goodwill, I was sharp enough to see that something was brewing between Bruhl and Marshal Retz, who stood back conversing in low tones. I was not surprised, therefore, when the former made his way towards me through the press which filled the antechamber, and with a lowering brow requested a word with me.

"Certainly," I said, watching him narrowly, for I knew him to be both treacherous and a bully. "Speak on, sir."

"You have baulked me once and again," he rejoined, in a voice which shook a little, as did the fingers with which he stroked his waxed moustache. "There is no need of

words between us. I, with one sword besides, will to-morrow at noon keep the bridge at Chaverny, a league from here. It is an open country. Possibly your pleasure may lead you to ride that way with a friend?"

"You may depend upon me, sir," I answered, bowing low, and feeling thankful that the matter was at length to be brought to a fair and open arbitration. "I will be there—and in person. For my deputy last night," I added, searching his face with a steadfast eye, "seems to have been somewhat unlucky."

CHAPTER XXI.

TWO WOMEN.

Out of compliment, and to show my gratitude, I attended M. de Rambouillet home to his lodging, and found him as much pleased with himself, and consequently with me, as I was with him. For the time, indeed, I came near to loving him; and, certainly, he was a man of high and patriotic feeling, and of skill and conduct to match. But he lacked that touch of nature and that power of sympathising with others which gave to such men as M. de Rosny and the king, my master, their peculiar charm; though after what I have related of him in the last chapter it does not lie in my mouth to speak ill of him. And, indeed, he was a good man.

When I at last reached my lodging, I found a surprise awaiting me in the shape of a note

which had just arrived no one knew how. If the manner of its delivery was mysterious, however, its contents were brief and sufficiently explicit; for it ran thus: "*Sir, by meeting me three hours after noon in the square before the House of the Little Sisters you will do a service at once to yourself and to the undersigned, Marie de Bruhl*".

That was all, written in a feminine character, yet it was enough to perplex me. Simon, who had manifested the liveliest joy at my escape, would have had me treat it as I had treated the invitation to the Parvis of the Cathedral—ignore it altogether, I mean. But I was of a different mind, and this for three reasons, among others: that the request was straightforward, the time early, and the place sufficiently public to be an unlikely theatre for violence, though well fitted for an interview to which the world at large was not invited. Then, too, the square lay little more than a bowshot from my lodging, though on the farther side of the Rue St. Denys.

Besides, I could conceive many grounds which Madame de Bruhl might have for seeing me; of which some touched me nearly. I disregarded Simon's warnings, therefore, and repaired at the time appointed to the place—a clean, paved square a little off the Rue St. Denys, and entered from the latter by a narrow passage. It was a spot pleasantly convenient for meditation, but overlooked on one side by the House of the Little Sisters; in which, as I guessed afterwards, madame must have awaited me, for the square when I entered it was empty; yet in a moment, though no one came in from the street, she stood beside me. She wore a mask and a long cloak. The beautiful hair and perfect complexion, which had filled me with so much admiration at our first meeting in her house, were hidden, but I saw enough of her figure and carriage to be sure it was Madame de Bruhl and no other.

She began by addressing me in a tone of bitterness, for which I was not altogether unprepared.

"Well, sir," she exclaimed, her voice trembling with anger, "you are satisfied, I hope, with your work?"

I expected this, and had my answer ready. "I am not aware, madame," I said, "that I have cause to reproach myself. But, however that may be, I trust you have summoned me for some better purpose than to chide me for another's fault; though it was my voice which brought it to light."

"Why did you shame me publicly?" she retorted, thrusting her handkerchief to her lips and withdrawing it again with a passionate gesture.

"Madame," I answered patiently—I was full of pity for her, "consider for a moment the wrong your husband did me, and how small and inadequate was the thing I did to him in return."

"To him!" she ejaculated so fiercely that I started. "It was to me—to me you did it! What had I done that you should expose me to the ridicule of those who know no pity,

and the anger of one as merciless? What had I done, sir?"

I shook my head sorrowfully. "So far, madame," I answered, "I allow I owe you reparation, and I will make it should it ever be in my power. Nay, I will say more," I continued, for the tone in which she spoke had wrung my heart. "In one point I strained the case against your husband. To the best of my belief he abducted the lady who was in my charge, not for the love of her, but for political reasons and as the agent of another."

She gasped. "What?" she cried. "Say that again!"

As I complied she tore off her mask and gazed into my face with straining eyes and parted lips. I saw then how much she was changed, even in these few days—how pale and worn were her cheeks, how dark the circles round her eyes. "Will you swear to it?" she said at last, speaking with uncontrollable eagerness, while she laid a hand

which shook with excitement on my arm. "Will you swear to it, sir?"

"It is true," I answered steadfastly. I might have added that after the event her husband had so treated Mademoiselle as to lead her to fear the worst. But I refrained, feeling that it was no part of my duty to come between husband and wife.

She clasped her hands, and for a moment looked passionately upwards, as though she were giving thanks to Heaven; while the flush of health and loveliness which I had so much admired returned, and illumined her face in a wonderful manner. She seemed, in truth and for a moment, transformed. Her blue eyes filled with tears, her lips moved; nor have I ever seen anything bear so near a resemblance to those pictures of the Virgin Mary which Romans worship as madame did then.

The change, however, was as evanescent as it was admirable. In an instant she seemed to collapse. She struck her hands to her face

and moaned, and I saw tears, which she vainly strove to restrain, dropping through her fingers. "Too late!" she murmured, in a tone of anguish which wrung my heart. "Alas, you robbed me of one man, you give me back another. I know him now for what he is. If he did not love her then, he does now. It is too late!"

She seemed so much overcome that I assisted her to reach a bench which stood against the wall a few paces away; nor, I confess, was it without difficulty and much self-reproach that I limited myself to those prudent offices only which her state and my duty required. To console her on the subject of her husband was impossible; to ignore him, and so to console her, a task which neither my discretion nor my sense of honour, though sorely tried, permitted me to undertake.

She presently recovered, and, putting on her mask again, said hurriedly that she had still a word to say to me. "You have treated me honestly," she continued, "and, though I have

no cause to do anything but hate you, I say in return, look to yourself! You escaped last night,—I know all, for it was my velvet knot, which I had made thinking to send it to you to procure this meeting, that he used as a lure. But he is not yet at the end of his resources. Look to yourself, therefore."

I thought of the appointment I had made with him for the morrow, but I confined myself to thanking her, merely saying, as I bowed over the hand she resigned to me in token of farewell, "Madame, I am grateful. I am obliged to you both for your warning and your forgiveness."

Bending her head coldly she drew away her hand. At that moment, as I lifted my eyes, I saw something which for an instant rooted me to the spot with astonishment. In the entrance of the passage which led to the Rue St. Denys two people were standing, watching us. One was Simon Fleix; the other, a masked woman, a trifle below the middle height, and clad in a riding-coat, was Mademoiselle de la Vire!

I knew her in a moment. But the relief I experienced on seeing her safe and in Blois was not unmixed with annoyance that Simon Fleix should have been so imprudent as to parade her unnecessarily in the street. I felt something of confusion also on my own account; for I could not tell how long she and her escort had been watching me. And these two feelings were augmented when, after turning to pay a final salute to Madame de Bruhl, I looked again towards the passage and discovered that Mademoiselle and her squire were gone.

Impatient as I was, I would not seem to leave madame rudely or without feeling, after the consideration she had shown me in her own sorrow; and accordingly I waited uncovered until she disappeared within the "Little Sisters". Then I started eagerly towards my lodging, thinking I may yet overtake Mademoiselle before she entered. I was destined to meet, however, with another though very pertinent hindrance. As I passed from

the Rue St. Denys into the quiet of my street I heard a voice calling my name, and, looking back, saw M. de Rambouillet's equerry, a man deep in his confidence, running after me. He brought a message from his master, which he begged me to consider of the first importance.

"The Marquis would not trust it to writing, sir," he continued, drawing me aside into a corner where we were conveniently retired, "but he made me learn it by heart. 'Tell M. de Marsac,' said he, 'that that which he was left in Blois to do must be done quickly, or not at all. There is something afoot in the other camp, I am not sure what. But now is the time to knock in the nail. I know his zeal, and I depend upon him.'"

An hour before I should have listened to this message with serious doubts and misgivings. Now, acquainted with Mademoiselle's arrival, I returned M. de Rambouillet an answer in the same strain; and parting civilly from Bertram, who was a man I much esteemed,

I hastened on to my lodgings, exulting in the thought that the hour and the woman were come at last, and that before the dawn of another day I might hope, all being well, to accomplish with honour to myself and advantage to others the commission which M. de Rosny had entrusted to me.

I must not deny that, mingled with this, was some excitement at the prospect of seeing Mademoiselle again. I strove to conjure up before me as I mounted the stairs the exact expression of her face as I had last seen it bending from the window at Rosny; to the end that I might have some guide for my future conduct, and might be less likely to fall into the snare of a young girl's coquetry. But I could come now, as then, to no satisfactory or safe conclusion, and only felt anew the vexation I had experienced on losing the velvet knot, which she had given me on that occasion.

I knocked at the door of the rooms which I had reserved for her, and which were on the

floor below my own; but I got no answer. Supposing that Simon had taken her upstairs, I mounted quickly, not doubting I should find her there. Judge of my surprise and dismay when I found that room also empty, save for the lackey whom M. de Rambouillet had lent me!

"Where are they?" I asked the man, speaking sharply, and standing with my hand on the door.

"The lady and her woman, sir?" he answered, coming forward.

"Yes, yes!" I cried impatiently, a sudden fear at my heart.

"She went out immediately after her arrival with Simon Fleix, sir, and has not yet returned," he answered.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before I heard several persons enter the passage below and begin to ascend the stairs. I did not doubt that Mademoiselle and the lad had come home another way, and been somehow detained; and I turned with a sigh of relief

to receive them. But when the persons whose steps I had heard appeared, they proved to be only M. de Rosny's equerry, stout, burly, and bright-eyed as ever, and two armed servants.

CHAPTER XXII.

"LA FEMME DISPOSE."

The moment the equerry's foot touched the uppermost stair I advanced upon him. "Where is your mistress, man?" I said. "Where is Mademoiselle de la Vire? Be quick, tell me what you have done with her."

His face fell amazingly. "Where is she?" he answered, faltering between surprise and alarm at my sudden onslaught. "Here, she should be. I left her here not an hour ago. Mon Dieu! Is she not here now?"

His alarm increased mine tenfold. "No!" I retorted, "she is not! She is gone! And you—what business had you, in the fiend's name, to leave her here, alone and unprotected? Tell me that!"

He leaned against the balustrade, making no attempt to defend himself, and seemed, in

his sudden terror, anything but the bold, alert fellow who had ascended the stairs two minutes before. "I was a fool," he groaned. "I saw your man Simon here; and Fanchette, who is as good as a man, was with her mistress. And I went to stable the horses. I thought no evil. And now—my God!" he added, suddenly straightening himself, while his face grew hard and grim, "I am undone! My master will never forgive me!"

"Did you come straight here?" I said, considering that, after all, he was no more in fault than I had been on a former occasion.

"We went first to M. de Rosny's lodging," he answered, "where we found your message telling us to come here. We came on without dismounting."

"Mademoiselle may have gone back, and be there," I said. "It is possible. Do you stay here and keep a good look-out, and I will go and see. Let one of your men come with me."

He uttered a brief assent; being a man as

ready to take as to give orders, and thankful now for any suggestion which held out a hope of Mademoiselle's safety. Followed by the servant he selected, I ran down the stairs, and in a moment was hurrying along the Rue St. Denys. The day was waning. The narrow streets and alleys were already dark; but the air of excitement which I had noticed in the morning still marked the townfolk, of whom a great number were strolling abroad, or standing in doorways talking to their gossips. Feverishly anxious as I was, I remarked the gloom which dwelt on all faces; but as I set it down to the king's approaching departure, and besides was intent on seeing that those we sought did not by any chance pass us in the crowd, I thought little of it. Five minutes' walking brought us to M. de Rosny's lodging. There I knocked at the door!—impatiently, I confess, and with little hope of success. But, to my surprise, barely an instant elapsed before the door opened, and I saw before me Simon Fleix!

Discovering who it was, he cowered back with a terrified face, and retreated to the wall with his arm raised.

"You scoundrel!" I exclaimed, restraining myself with difficulty. "Tell me this moment where Mademoiselle de la Vire is! Or, by Heaven, I shall forget what my mother owed to you, and do you a mischief!"

For an instant he glared at me viciously, with all his teeth exposed, as though he meant to refuse—and more. Then he thought better of it, and, raising his hand, pointed sulkily upwards.

"Go before me and knock at the door," I said, tapping the hilt of my dagger with meaning.

Cowed by my manner, he obeyed, and led the way to the room in which M. de Rambouillet had surprised us on a former occasion. Here he stopped at the door and knocked gently; on which a sharp voice inside bade us enter. I raised the latch and did so, closing the door behind me.

Mademoiselle, still wearing her riding-coat, sat in a chair before the hearth, on which a newly kindled fire sputtered and smoked. She had her back to me, and did not turn on my entrance, but continued to toy in an absent manner with the strings of the mask which lay in her lap. Fanchette stood bolt upright behind her, with her elbows squared and her hands clasped—in such an attitude that I guessed the maid had been expressing her strong dissatisfaction with this latest whim of her mistress, and particularly with Mademoiselle's imprudence in wantonly exposing herself, with so inadequate a guard as Simon, in a place where she had already suffered so much. I was confirmed in this notion on seeing the woman's harsh countenance clear at sight of me; though the churlish nod, which was all the greeting she bestowed on me, seemed to betoken anything but favour or good-will. She touched her mistress on the shoulder, however, and said, "M. de Marsac is here."

Mademoiselle turned her head and looked at me languidly, without stirring in her chair or removing the foot she was warming. "Good evening!" she said.

The greeting seemed so brief and so commonplace, ignoring, as it did, both the pains and anxiety to which she had just put me and the great purpose for which we were here—to say nothing of that ambiguous parting which she must surely remember as well as I—that the words I had prepared died on my lips, and I looked at her in honest confusion. All her small face was pale except her lips. Her brow was dark, her eyes were hard as well as weary. And not words only failed me as I looked at her, but anger; having mounted the stairs hot foot to chide, I felt on a sudden—despite my new cloak and scabbard, my appointment, and the name I had made at Court—the same consciousness of age and shabbiness and poverty which had possessed me in her presence from the beginning. I muttered, "Good evening, Made-

moiselle!" and that was all I could say—I who had frightened the burly Maignan a few minutes before!

Seeing, I have no doubt, the effect she produced on me, she maintained for some time an embarrassing silence. At length she said, frigidly, "Perhaps M. de Marsac will sit, Fanchette. Place a chair for him. I am afraid, however, that after his successes at Court he may find our reception somewhat cold. But we are only from the country," she added, looking at me askance, with a gleam of anger in her eyes.

I thanked her huskily, saying that I would not sit, as I could not stay. "Simon Fleix," I continued, finding my voice with difficulty, "has, I am afraid, caused you some trouble by bringing you to this house instead of telling you that I had made preparation for you at my lodgings."

"It was not Simon Fleix's fault," she replied curtly. "I prefer these rooms. They are more convenient."

"They are, perhaps, more convenient," I rejoined humbly, "but I have to think of safety, Mademoiselle, as you know. At my house I have a competent guard, and can answer for your being unmolested."

"You can send your guard here," she said with a royal air.

"But, Mademoiselle ——"

"Is it not enough that I have said that I prefer these rooms?" she replied sharply, dropping her mask on her lap and looking round at me in undisguised displeasure. "Are you deaf, sir? Let me tell you, I am in no mood for argument. I am tired with riding. I prefer these rooms, and that is enough!"

Nothing could exceed the determination with which she said these words, unless it were the malicious pleasure in thwarting my wishes which made itself seen through the veil of assumed indifference. I felt myself brought up with a vengeance, and in a manner the most provoking that could be conceived.

But opposition so childish, so utterly wanton, by exciting my indignation, had presently the effect of banishing the peculiar bashfulness I felt in her presence, and recalling me to my duty.

"Mademoiselle," I said firmly, looking at her with a fixed countenance, "pardon me if I speak plainly. This is no time for playing with straws. The men from whom you escaped once are as determined and more desperate now. By this time they probably know of our arrival. Do, then, as I ask, I pray and beseech you. Or this time I may lack the power, though never the will, to save you."

Wholly ignoring my appeal, she looked into my face—for by this time I had advanced to her side—with a whimsical smile. "You are really much improved in manner since I last saw you," she said.

"Mademoiselle!" I replied, baffled and repelled. "What do you mean?"

"What I say," she answered flippantly. "But it was to be expected."

"For shame!" I cried, provoked almost beyond bearing by her ill-timed raillery. "Will you never be serious until you have ruined us and yourself? I tell you this house is not safe for you. It is not safe for me. I cannot bring my men to it, for there is not room for them. If you have any spark of consideration, of gratitude, therefore ——"

"Gratitude!" she exclaimed, swinging her mask slowly to and fro by a ribbon, while she looked up at me as though my excitement amused her. "Gratitude! 'tis a very pretty phrase, and means much; but it is for those who serve us faithfully, M. de Marsac, and not for others. You receive so many favours, I am told, and are so successful at Court, that I should not be justified in monopolising your services."

"But, Mademoiselle—" I said in a low tone. And there I stopped. I dared not proceed.

"Well, sir," she answered, looking up at me after a moment's silence, and ceasing on a sudden to play with her toy, "what is it?"

"You spoke of favours," I continued, with an effort. "I never received but one from a lady. That was at Rosny, and from your hand."

"From my hand?" she answered, with an air of cold surprise.

"It was so, Mademoiselle."

"You have fallen into some strange mistake, sir," she replied, rousing herself, and looking at me indifferently. "I never gave you a favour."

I bowed low. "If you say you did not, Mademoiselle, that is enough," I answered.

"Nay, but do not let me do you an injustice, M. de Marsac," she rejoined, speaking more quickly and in an altered tone. "If you can show me the favour I gave you I shall, of course, be convinced. Seeing is believing, you know," she added, with a light nervous laugh, and a gesture of something like shyness.

If I had not sufficiently regretted my carelessness, and loss of the bow at the time, I

did so now. I looked at her in silence, and saw her face, that had for a moment shown signs of feeling, almost of shame, grow slowly hard again.

"Well, sir?" she said impatiently. "The proof is easy."

"It was taken from me; I believe, by M. de Rosny," I answered lamely, wondering what ill-luck had led her to put the question and press it to this point.

"It was taken from you!" she exclaimed, rising and confronting me with the utmost suddenness, while her eyes flashed, and her little hand crumpled the mask beyond future usefulness. "It was taken from you, sir!" she repeated, her voice and her whole frame trembling with anger and disdain. "Then I thank you. I prefer my version. Yours is impossible. For let me tell you, when Mademoiselle de la Vire does confer a favour, it will be on a man with the power and the wit —and the constancy, to keep it, even from M. de Rosny!"

Her scorn hurt though it did not anger me. I felt it to be in a measure deserved, and raged against myself rather than against her. But aware through all of the supreme importance of placing her in safety, I subjected my immediate feelings to the exigencies of the moment, and stooped to an argument which would, I thought, have weight, though private pleading failed.

"Putting myself aside, Mademoiselle," I said, with more formality than I had yet used, "there is one consideration which must weigh with you. The king ——"

"The king!" she cried, interrupting me violently, her face hot with passion, and her whole person instinct with stubborn self-will. "I shall not see the king!"

"You will not see the king?" I repeated in amazement.

"No, I will not!" she answered, in a whirl of anger, scorn, and impetuosity. "There! I will not! I have been made a toy and a tool long enough, M. de Marsac," she continued,

"and I will serve others' ends no more. I have made up my mind. Do not talk to me; you will do no good, sir. I would to Heaven," she added bitterly, "I had stayed at Chizè and never seen this place!"

"But, Mademoiselle," I said, "you have not thought ——"

"Thought!" she exclaimed, shutting her small white teeth so viciously I all but recoiled. "I have thought enough. I am sick of thought. I am going to act now. I will be a puppet no longer. You may take me to the Castle by force if you will; but you cannot make me speak."

I looked at her in the utmost dismay and astonishment: being unable at first to believe that a woman who had gone through so much, had run so many risks, and ridden so many miles for a purpose, would, when all was done and the hour come, decline to carry out her plan. I could not believe it, I say, at first; and I tried arguments and entreaties without stint, thinking that she only asked to be entreated or coaxed.

But I found prayers and even threats breath wasted upon her; and beyond these I would not go. I know I have been blamed by some and ridiculed by others for not pushing the matter farther; but those who have stood face to face with a woman of spirit—a woman whose very frailty and weakness fought for her—will better understand the difficulties with which I had to contend and the manner in which conviction was at last borne in on my mind. I had never before confronted stubbornness of this kind. As Mademoiselle said again and again, I might force her to Court, but I could not make her speak.

When I had tried every means of persuasion, and still found no way of overcoming her resolution—the while Fanchette looked on with a face of wood, neither aiding me nor taking part against me—I lost, I confess, in the chagrin of the moment that sense of duty which had hitherto animated me; and though my relation to Mademoiselle should have made me as careful as ever of her safety, even in

her own despite, I left her at last in anger, and went out without saying another word about removing her—a thing which was still in my power. I believe a very brief reflection would have recalled me to myself and my duty; but the opportunity was not given me, for I had scarcely reached the head of the stairs before Fanchette came after me, and called to me in a whisper to stop.

She held a taper in her hand, and this she raised to my face, smiling at the disorder which she doubtless read there. "Do you say that this house is not safe?" she asked abruptly, lowering the light as she spoke.

"You have tried a house in Blois before?" I replied with the same bluntness. "You should know as well as I, woman."

"She must be taken from here, then," she answered, nodding her head, cunningly. "I can persuade her. Do you send for your people, and be here in half an hour. It may take me that time to wheedle her. But I shall do it."

"Then listen," I said eagerly, seizing the opportunity and her sleeve and drawing her farther from the door. "If you can persuade her to that, you can persuade her to all I wish. Listen, my friend," I continued, sinking my voice still lower. "If she will see the king for only ten minutes, and tell him what she knows, I will give you ——"

"What?" the woman asked suddenly and harshly, drawing at the same time her sleeve from my hand.

"Fifty crowns," I replied, naming in my desperation a sum which would seem a fortune to a person in her position. "Fifty crowns down, the moment the interview is over."

"And for that you would have me sell her!" the woman cried, with a rude intensity of passion which struck me like a blow. "For shame, for shame, man! You persuaded her to leave her home and her friends, and the country where she was known; and now you would have me sell her! Shame on you! Go!"

she added scornfully. "Go this instant, and get your men. The king, say you? The king! I tell you I would not have her finger ache to save all your kings!"

She flounced away with that, and I retired crestfallen; wondering much at the fidelity which Providence, doubtless for the well-being of the gentle, possibly for the good of all, has implanted in the humble. Finding Simon, to whom I had scarce patience to speak, waiting on the stairs below, I despatched him to Maignan, to bid him come to me with his men. Meanwhile I watched the house myself until their arrival, and then, going up, found that Fanchette had been as good as her word. Mademoiselle, with a sullen mien, and a red spot on either cheek, consented to descend, and preceded by a couple of links, which Maignan had thoughtfully provided, was escorted safely to my lodgings; where I bestowed her in the rooms below my own, which I had designed for her.

At the door she turned and bowed to me, her face on fire.

"So far, sir, you have got your way," she said, breathing quickly. "Do not flatter yourself, however, you will get it farther—even by bribing my woman!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAST VALOIS.

I stood for a few moments on the stairs, wondering what I should do in an emergency to which the Marquis's message of the afternoon attached so pressing a character. Had it not been for that I might have waited until morning, and felt tolerably certain of finding Mademoiselle in a more reasonable mood then. But as it was I dared not wait. I dared not risk the delay, and I came quickly to the conclusion that the only course open to me was to go at once to M. de Rambouillet, and tell him frankly how the matter stood.

Maignan had posted one of his men at the open doorway leading into the street, and fixed his own quarters on the landing at the top, whence he could overlook an intruder without being seen himself. Satisfied with

the arrangement, I left Rambouillet's man to reinforce him, and took with me Simon Fleix, of whose conduct in regard to Mademoiselle I entertained the gravest doubts.

The night, I found on reaching the street, was cold, the sky where it was visible between the eaves being bright with stars. A sharp wind was blowing, too, compelling us to wrap our cloaks round us and hurry on at a pace which agreed well with the excitement of my thoughts. Assured that had Mademoiselle been complaisant I might have seen my mission accomplished within the hour, it was impossible I should not feel impatient with one who, to gratify a whim, played with the secrets of a kingdom as if they were counters, and risked in passing ill-humour the results of weeks of preparation. And I was impatient, and with her. But my resentment fell so far short of the occasion that I wondered uneasily at my own easiness, and felt more annoyed with myself for failing to be properly annoyed with her, than inclined

to lay the blame where it was due. It was in vain I told myself contemptuously that she was a woman, and that women were not accountable. I felt that the real secret and motive of my indulgence lay, not in this, but in the suspicion, which her reference to the favour given me on my departure from Rosny had converted almost into a certainty, that I was myself the cause of her sudden ill-humour.

I might have followed this train of thought farther, and to very pertinent conclusions. But on reaching M. de Rambouillet's lodging I was diverted from it by the abnormally quiet aspect of the house, on the steps of which half-a-dozen servants might commonly be seen lounging. Now the doors were closed, no lights shone through the windows, and the hall sounded empty and desolate when I knocked. Not a lackey hurried to receive me even then; but the slipshod tread of the old porter, as he came with a lantern to open, alone broke the silence. I waited eagerly, wondering what all this could mean: and

when the man at last opened, and, recognising my face, begged my pardon if he had kept me waiting, I asked him impatiently what was the matter.

"And where is the Marquis?" I added, stepping inside to be out of the wind, and loosening my cloak.

"Have you not heard, sir?" the man asked, holding up his lantern to my face. He was an old, wizened, lean fellow. "It is a break-up, sir, I am afraid, this time."

"A break-up?" I rejoined, peevishly. "Speak out, man! What is the matter? I hate mysteries."

"You have not heard the news, sir? That the Duke of Mercœur and Marshal Retz, with all their people, left Blois this afternoon?"

"No!" I answered, somewhat startled. "Whither are they gone?"

"To Paris, it is said, sir,—to join the League."

"But do you mean that they have deserted the king?" I asked.

"For certain, sir!" he answered.

"Not the Duke of Mercœur?" I exclaimed. "Why, man, he is the king's brother-in-law. He owes everything to him."

"Well, he is gone, sir," the old man answered positively. "The news was brought to M. le Marquis about four o'clock or a little after. He got his people together, and started after them to try and persuade them to return. Or, so it is said."

As quickly as I could, I reviewed the situation in my mind. If this strange news were true, and men like Mercœur, who had every reason to stand by the king, as well as men like Retz, who had long been suspected of disaffection, were abandoning the Court, the danger must be coming close indeed. The king must feel his throne already tottering, and be eager to grasp any means of supporting it. Under such circumstances it seemed to be my paramount duty to reach him; to gain his ear if possible, and at all risks; that I, and not Bruhl, Navarre, and

Turenne, might profit by the first impulse of self-preservation.

Bidding the porter shut his door and keep close, I hurried to the Castle, and was presently more than confirmed in my resolution. For to my surprise I found the Court in much the same state as M. de Rambouillet's house. There were double guards indeed at the gates, who let me pass after scrutinising me narrowly; but the courtyard, which should have been at this hour ablaze with torches and crowded with lackeys and grooms, was a dark wilderness, in which half-a-dozen links trembled mournfully. Passing through the doors I found things within in the same state: the hall ill lit and desolate; the staircase manned only by a few whispering groups, who scanned me as I passed; the ante-chambers almost empty, or occupied by the grey uniforms of the Switzer guards. Where I had looked to see courtiers assembling to meet their sovereign and assure him of their fidelity, I found only gloomy faces,

watchful eyes, and mouths ominously closed. An air of constraint and foreboding rested on all. A single footstep sounded hollowly. The long corridors, which had so lately rung with laughter and the rattle of dice, seemed already devoted to the silence and desolation which awaited them when the Court should depart. Where any spoke I caught the name of Guise; and I could have fancied that his mighty shadow lay upon the place and cursed it.

Entering the chamber, I found matters little better there. His Majesty was not present, nor were any of the Court ladies; but half-a-dozen gentlemen, among whom I recognised Revol, one of the king's secretaries, stood near the alcove. They looked up on my entrance, as though expecting news, and then, seeing who it was, looked away again impatiently. The Duke of Nevers was walking moodily to and fro before one of the windows, his hands clasped behind his back: while Biron and Crillon, reconciled by the common

peril, talked loudly on the hearth. I hesitated a moment, uncertain how to proceed, for I was not yet so old at Court as to feel at home there. But, at last making up my mind, I walked boldly up to Crillon, and requested his good offices to procure me an immediate audience of the king.

"An audience? Do you mean you want to see him alone?" he said, raising his eyebrows, and looking whimsically at Biron.

"That is my petition, M. de Crillon," I answered firmly, though my heart sank. "I am here on M. de Rambouillet's business, and I need to see his Majesty forthwith."

"Well, that is straightforward," he replied, clapping me on the shoulder. "And you shall see him. In coming to Crillon you have come to the right man. Revol," he continued, turning to the secretary, "this gentleman bears a message from M. de Rambouillet to the king. Take him to the closet without delay, my friend, and announce him. I will be answerable for him."

But the secretary shrugged his shoulders up to his ears. "It is quite impossible, M. de Crillon," he said gravely. "Quite impossible at present."

"Impossible! Chut! I do not know the word," Crillon retorted rudely. "Come, take him at once, and blame me if ill comes of it. Do you hear?"

"But his Majesty ——"

"Well?"

"Is at his devotions," the secretary said stiffly.

"His Majesty's devotions be hanged!" Crillon rejoined—so loudly that there was a general titter; and M. de Nevers laughed grimly. "Do you hear?" the Avennais continued, his face growing redder and his voice higher, "or must I pull your ears, my friend? Take this gentleman to the closet, I say; and if his Majesty be angry, tell him it was by my order. I tell you he comes from Rambouillet."

I do not know whether it was the threat,

or the mention of M. de Rambouillet's name, which convinced the secretary. But at any rate, after a moment's hesitation, he acquiesced.

He nodded sullenly to me to follow him, and led the way to a curtain which masked the door of the closet. I followed him across the chamber, after muttering a hasty word of acknowledgment to Crillon; and I had as nearly as possible reached the door when the bustle of some one entering the chamber caught my ear. I had just time to turn and see that this was Bruhl, just time to intercept the dark look of chagrin and surprise which he fixed on me; and then Revol, holding up the curtain, signed to me to enter.

I expected to pass at once into the presence of the king, and had my reverence ready. Instead, I found myself to my surprise in a small chamber, or rather passage, curtained at both ends, and occupied by a couple of guardsmen—members, doubtless, of the Band of the Forty-five—who rose at my entrance

and looked at me dubiously. Their guard-room, dimly illumined by a lamp of red glass, seemed to me, in spite of its curtains and velvet bench, and the thick tapestry which kept out every breath of wholesome air, the most sombre I could imagine. And the most ill-omened. But I had no time to make any long observation; for Revol, passing me brusquely, raised the curtain at the other end, and, with his finger on his lip, bade me by signs to enter.

I did so as silently, the heavy scent of perfumes striking me in the face as I raised a second curtain, and stopped short a pace beyond it; partly in reverence—because kings love their subjects best at a distance—and partly in surprise. For the room, or rather that portion of it in which I stood, was in darkness; only the farther end being illumined by a cold pale flood of moonlight, which, passing through a high, strait window, lay in a silvery sheet on the floor. For an instant I thought I was alone; then I saw, resting

against this window, with a hand on either mullion, a tall figure, having something strange about the head. This peculiarity presently resolved itself into the turban in which I had once before seen his Majesty. The king—for he it was—was talking to himself. He had not heard me enter, and having his back to me remained unconscious of my presence.

I paused in doubt, afraid to advance, anxious to withdraw; yet uncertain whether I could move again unheard. At this moment while I stood hesitating, he raised his voice, and his words, reaching my ears, riveted my attention, so strange and eerie were both they and his tone. "They say there is ill-luck in thirteen," he muttered. "Thirteenth Valois and last!" He paused, to laugh a wicked, mirthless laugh. "Ay,—Thirteenth! And it is thirteen years since I entered Paris, a crowned King! There were Quélus and Maugiron and St. Mégrin and I—and *he*, I remember. Ah, those days, those nights! I would sell my soul to live them again; had I

not sold it long ago in the living them once! We were young then, and rich, and I was king; and Quélus was an Apollo! He died calling on me to save him. And Maugiron died, blaspheming God and the saints. And St. Mégrin, he had thirty-four wounds. And *he* —he is dead too, curse him! They are all dead, all dead, and it is all over! My God! it is all over, it is all over, it is all over!"

He repeated the last four words more than a dozen times, rocking himself to and fro by his hold on the mullions. I trembled as I listened, partly through fear on my own account should I be discovered, and partly by reason of the horror of despair and remorse —no, not remorse, regret—which spoke in his monotonous voice. I guessed that some impulse had led him to draw the curtain from the window and shade the lamp; and that then, as he looked down on the moonlit country, the contrast between it and the vicious, heated atmosphere, heavy with intrigue and worse, in which he had spent his

strength, had forced itself upon his mind. For he presently went on.

"France! Ay, there it lies! And what will they do with it? Will they cut it up into pieces, as it was before old Louis XI.? Will Mercœur—curse him!—be the most Christian Duke of Brittany? And Mayenne, by the grace of God, Prince of Paris and the upper Seine? Or will the little Prince of Béarn beat them, and be Henry IV., King of France and Navarre, Protector of the Churches? Curse him too! He is thirty-six. He is my age. But he is young and strong, and has all before him. While I—I—oh, my God, have mercy on me! Have mercy on me, O God in heaven!"

With the last word he fell on his knees on the step before the window, and burst into such an agony of unmanly tears and sobbings as I had never dreamed of or imagined, and least of all in the King of France. Hardly knowing whether to be more ashamed or terrified, I turned at all risks, and stealthily

lifting the curtain, crept out with infinite care; and happily with so much good fortune as to escape detection. There was space enough between the two curtains to admit my body and no more; and here I stood a short while to collect my thoughts. Then, striking my scabbard against the wall, as though by accident, and coughing loudly at the same moment, I twitched the curtain aside with some violence, and re-entered, thinking that by these means I had given him warning enough.

But I had not reckoned on the darkness in which the room lay, or the excitable state in which I had left him. He heard me, indeed; but being able to see only a tall, indistinct figure approaching him, he took fright, and falling back against the moonlit window, as though he saw a ghost, thrust out his hand, gasping at the same time two words, which sounded to me like "Ha! Guise!"

The next instant, discerning that I fell on my knee where I stood, and came no nearer,

he recovered himself. With an effort, which his breathing made very apparent, he asked in an unsteady voice who it was.

"One of your Majesty's most faithful servants," I answered, remaining on my knee, and affecting to see nothing.

Keeping his face towards me, he sidled to the lamp and strove to withdraw the shade. But his fingers trembled so violently that it was some time before he succeeded, and set free the cheerful beams, which, suddenly filling the room with radiance, disclosed to my wondering eyes, instead of darkness and the cold gleam of the moon, a profusion of riches, of red stuffs and gemmed trifles and gilded arms crowded together in reckless disorder. A monkey chained in one corner began to gibber and mow at me. A cloak of strange cut, stretched on a wooden stand, deceived me for an instant into thinking that there was a third person present; while the table, heaped with dolls and powder-puffs, dog-collars and sweetmeats, a mask, a woman's

slipper, a pair of pistols, some potions, a scourge, and an immense quantity of like litter, had as melancholy an appearance in my eyes as the king himself, whose disorder the light disclosed without mercy. His turban was awry, and betrayed the premature baldness of his scalp. The paint on his cheeks was cracked and stained, and had soiled the gloves he wore. He looked fifty years old; and in his excitement he had tugged his sword to the front, whence it refused to be thrust back.

"Who sent you here?" he asked, when he had so far recovered his senses as to recognise me, which he did with great surprise.

"I am here, sire," I answered evasively, "to place myself at your Majesty's service."

"Such loyalty is rare," he answered, with a bitter sneer. "But stand up, sir. I suppose I must be thankful for small mercies, and, losing a Mercœur, be glad to receive a Marsac."

"By your leave, sire," I rejoined hardily,

"the exchange is not so adverse. Your Majesty may make another duke when you will. But honest men are not so easily come by."

"So! so!" he answered, looking at me with a fierce light in his eyes. "You remind me in season. I may still make and unmake! I am still King of France? That is so, sirrah, is it not?"

"God forbid that it should be otherwise!" I answered earnestly. "It is to lay before your Majesty certain means by which you may give fuller effect to your wishes that I am here. The King of Navarre desires only, sire ——"

"Tut, tut!" he exclaimed impatiently, and with some displeasure. "I know his will better than you, man. But you see," he continued cunningly, forgetting my inferior position as quickly as he had remembered it, "Turenne promises well, too. And Turenne —it is true he may play the Lorrainer. But if I trust Henry of Navarre, and he proves false to me ——"

He did not complete the sentence, but strode to and fro a time or two, his mind, which had a natural inclination towards crooked courses, bent on some scheme by which he might play off the one party against the other. Apparently he was not very successful in finding one, however; or else the ill-luck with which he had supported the League against the Huguenots recurred to his mind. For he presently stopped, with a sigh, and came back to the point.

"If I knew that Turenne was lying," he muttered. "Then, indeed ——. But M. de Rosny promised evidence, and he has sent me none."

"It is at hand, sire," I answered, my heart beginning to beat. "Your Majesty will remember that M. de Rosny honoured me with the task of introducing it to you."

"To be sure," he replied, awaking as from a dream, and looking and speaking eagerly. "Matters to-day have driven everything out

of my head. Where is your witness, man? Convince me, and we will act promptly. We will give them Jarnac and Moncontour over again. Is he outside?"

"It is a woman, sire," I made answer, dashed somewhat by his sudden and feverish alacrity.

"A woman, eh? You have her here?"

"No, sire," I replied, wondering what he would say to my next piece of information. "She is in Blois, she has arrived; but the truth is—I humbly crave your Majesty's indulgence—she refuses to come or speak. I cannot well bring her here by force; and I have sought you, sire, for the purpose of taking your commands in the matter."

He stared at me in the utmost astonishment.

"Is she young?" he asked after a long pause.

"Yes, sire," I answered. "She is maid of honour to the Princess of Navarre, and a ward also of the Vicomte de Turenne."

"Gad! then she is worth hearing,—the little rebel!" he replied. "A ward of Turenne's, is she? Ho! ho! And now she will not speak? My cousin of Navarre now would know how to bring her to her senses, but I have eschewed these vanities. I might send and have her brought, it is true; but a very little thing would cause a barricade to-night."

"And besides, sire," I ventured to add, "she is known to Turenne's people here, who have once stolen her away. Were she brought to your Majesty with any degree of openness, they would learn it, and know that the game was lost."

"Which would not suit me," he answered, nodding and looking at me gloomily. "They might anticipate our Jarnac; and until we have settled matters with one or the other our person is not too secure. You must go and fetch her. She is at your lodging. She must be brought, man."

"I will do what you command, sire," I

answered. "But I am greatly afraid that she will not come."

He lost his temper at that. "Then why, in the devil's name, have you troubled me with the matter?" he cried savagely. "God knows—I don't—why Rosny employed such a man and such a woman. He might have seen from the cut of your cloak, sir, which is full six months behind the fashion, that you could not manage a woman! Was ever such damnable folly heard of in this world? But it is Navarre's loss, not mine. It is his loss. And I hope to Heaven it may be yours too!" he added fiercely.

There was so much in what he said that I bent before the storm, and accepted with humility blame which was as natural on his part as it was undeserved on mine. Indeed, I could not wonder at his Majesty's anger; nor should I have wondered at it in a greater man. I knew that but for reasons, on which I did not wish to dwell, I should have shared it to the full, and spoken quite as strongly of

the caprice which ruined hopes and lives for a whim.

The king continued for some time to say to me all the hard things he could think of. Wearied at last by my patience, he paused, and cried angrily, "Well, have you nothing to say for yourself? Can you suggest nothing?"

"I dare not mention to your Majesty," I said humbly, "what seems to me to be the only alternative."

"You mean that I should go to the wench!" he answered—for he did not lack quickness. "'*Se no va el otero a Mahoma, vaya Mahoma al otero,*' as Mendoza says. But the saucy quean, to force me to go to her! Did my wife guess—but there, I will go. By God I will go!" he added abruptly and fiercely. "I will live to ruin Retz yet! Where is your lodging?"

I told him, wondering much at this flash of the old spirit, which twenty years before had won him a reputation his later life did nothing to sustain.

"Do you know," he asked, speaking with sustained energy and clearness, "the door by which M. de Rosny entered to talk with me? Can you find it in the dark?"

"Yes, sire," I answered, my heart beating high.

"Then be in waiting there two hours before midnight," he replied. "Be well armed, but alone. I shall know how to make the girl speak. I can trust you, I suppose?" he added suddenly, stepping nearer to me and looking fixedly into my eyes.

"I will answer for your Majesty's life with my own," I replied, sinking on one knee.

"I believe you, sir," he answered gravely, giving me his hand to kiss, and then turning away. "So be it. Now leave me. You have been here too long already. Not a word to any one as you value your life."

I made fitting answer, and was leaving him; but when I had my hand already on the curtain, he called me back. "In Heaven's name get a new cloak!" he said peevishly,

eyeing me all over, with his face puckered up. "Get a new cloak, man, the first thing in the morning. It is worse seen from the side than the front. It would ruin the cleverest courtier of them all!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A ROYAL PERIL.

The elation with which I had heard the king announce his resolution quickly diminished on cooler reflection. It stood in particular at a very low ebb as I waited, an hour later, at the little north postern of the Castle, and, cowering within the shelter of the arch to escape the wind, debated whether his Majesty's energy would sustain him to the point of action, or whether he might not, in one of those fits of treacherous vacillation which had again and again marred his plans, send those to keep the appointment who would give a final account of me. The longer I considered his character the more dubious I grew. The loneliness of the situation, the darkness, the black front unbroken by any glimmer of light, which the Castle presented on this side, and

the unusual and gloomy stillness which lay upon the town, all contributed to increase my uneasiness. It was with apprehension as well as relief that I caught at last the sound of footsteps on the stone staircase, and, standing a little to one side, saw a streak of light appear at the foot of the door.

On the latter being partially opened a voice cried my name. I advanced with caution and showed myself. A brief conversation ensued between two or three persons who stood within; but in the end, a masked figure, which I had no difficulty in identifying as the king, stepped briskly out.

"You are armed?" he said, pausing a second opposite me.

I put back my cloak and showed him, by the light which streamed from the doorway, that I carried pistols as well as a sword.

"Good!" he answered briefly; "then let us go. Do you walk on my left hand, my friend. It is a dark night, is it not?"

"Very dark, sire," I said.

He made no answer to this, and we started, proceeding with caution until we had crossed the narrow bridge, and then with greater freedom and at a better pace. The slenderness of the attendance at Court that evening, and the cold wind, which swept even the narrowest streets, and drove roisterers indoors, rendered it unlikely that we should be stopped or molested by any except professed thieves; and for these I was prepared. The king showed no inclination to talk; and keeping silence myself out of respect, I had time to calculate the chances, and to consider whether his Majesty would succeed where I had failed.

This calculation, which was not inconsistent with the keenest watchfulness on my part whenever we turned a corner or passed the mouth of an alley, was brought to an end by our safe arrival at the house. Briefly apologising to the king for the meanness and darkness of the staircase, I begged leave to precede him, and rapidly mounted until I

met Maignan. Whispering to him that all was well I did not wait to hear his answer, but, bidding him be on the watch, I led the king on with as much deference as was possible until we stood at the door of Mademoiselle's apartment, which I have elsewhere stated to consist of an outer and inner room. The door was opened by Simon Fleix, and him I promptly sent out. Then, standing aside and uncovering, I begged the king to enter.

He did so, still wearing his hat and mask, and I followed and secured the door. A lamp hanging from the ceiling diffused an imperfect light through the room, which was smaller but more comfortable in appearance than that which I rented overhead. I observed that Fanchette, whose harsh countenance looked more forbidding than usual, occupied a stool which she had set in a strange fashion against the inner door; but I thought no more of this at the moment, my attention passing quickly to Mademoiselle, who sat

crouching before the fire, enveloped in a large outdoor cloak, as if she felt the cold. Her back was towards us, and she was, or pretended to be, still ignorant of our presence. With a muttered word I pointed her out to the king, and went towards her with him.

"Mademoiselle," I said in a low voice, "Mademoiselle de la Vire! I have the honour——"

She would not turn, and I stopped. Clearly she heard, but she betrayed that she did so only by drawing her cloak more closely round her. Primed by my respect for the king, I touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Mademoiselle!" I said impatiently, "you are not aware of it, but ——"

She shook herself free from my hand with so rude a gesture that I broke off, and stood gaping foolishly at her. The king smiled, and nodding to me to step back a pace, took the task on himself. "Mademoiselle," he said with dignity, "I am not accustomed ——"

His voice had a magical effect. Before he could add another word she sprang up as if

she had been struck, and faced us, a cry of alarm on her lips. Simultaneously we both cried out too, for it was not Mademoiselle at all. The woman who confronted us, her hand on her mask, her eyes glittering through the slits, was of a taller and fuller figure. We stared at her. Then a lock of bright golden hair which had escaped from the hood of her cloak gave us the clue. "Madame!" the king cried.

"Madame de Bruhl!" I echoed, my astonishment greater than his.

Seeing herself known, she began with trembling fingers to undo the fastenings of her mask; but the king, who had hitherto displayed a trustfulness I had not expected in him, had taken alarm at sight of her, as at a thing unlooked for, and of which I had not warned him. "How is this?" he said harshly, drawing back a pace from her, and regarding me with anger and distrust. "Is this some pretty arrangement of yours, sir? Am I an intruder at an assignation, or is this a trap

with M. de Bruhl in the background? Answer, sirrah!" he continued, working himself rapidly into a passion. "Which am I to understand is the case?"

"Neither, sire," I answered, with as much dignity as I could assume, utterly surprised and mystified as I was by madame's presence. "Your Majesty wrongs Madame de Bruhl as much by the one suspicion as you injure me by the other. I am equally in the dark with you, sire, and as little expected to see madame here."

"I came, sire," she said proudly, addressing herself to the king, and ignoring me, "out of no love to M. de Marsac, but as any person bearing a message to him might come. Nor can you, sire," she added with spirit, "feel half as much surprise at seeing me here, as I at seeing your Majesty."

"I can believe that," the king answered drily. "I would you had not seen me."

"The King of France is seen only when he chooses," she replied, curtseying to the ground.

"Good," he answered. "Let it be so, and you will oblige the King of France, madame. But enough," he continued, turning from her to me; "since this is not the lady I came to see, M. de Marsac, where is she?"

"In the inner room, sire, I opine," I said, advancing to Fanchette, with more misgiving at heart than my manner evinced. "Your mistress is here, is she not?" I continued, addressing the woman sharply.

"Aye, and will not come out," she rejoined, sturdily keeping her place.

"Nonsense!" I said. "Tell her ——"

"You may tell her what you please," she replied, refusing to budge an inch. "She can hear."

"But, woman!" I cried impatiently, "you do not understand. I *must* speak with her. I must speak with her at once! On business of the highest importance."

"As you please," she said rudely, still keeping her seat. "I have told you you can speak."

Perhaps I felt as foolish on this occasion as ever in my life; and surely never was man placed in a more ridiculous position. After overcoming numberless obstacles, and escaping as many perils, I had brought the king here, a feat beyond my highest hopes, only to be baffled and defeated by a waiting woman! I stood irresolute—witless and confused—while the king waited half angry and half amused, and madame kept her place by the entrance, to which she had retreated.

I was delivered from my dilemma by the curiosity which is, providentially perhaps, a part of women's character, and which led Mademoiselle to interfere herself. Keenly on the watch inside, she had heard part of what passed between us, and been rendered inquisitive by the sound of a strange man's voice, and by the deference which she could discern I paid to the visitor. At this moment she cried out, accordingly, to know who was there; and Fanchette, seeming to take this as a command, rose and dragged her stool aside,

saying peevishly and without any increase of respect, "There, I told you she could hear."

"Who is it?" Mademoiselle asked again, in a raised voice.

I was about to answer when the king signed to me to stand back, and, advancing himself, knocked gently on the door. "Open, I pray you, Mademoiselle," he said courteously.

"Who is there?" she cried again, her voice trembling.

"It is I, the king!" he answered softly; but in that tone of majesty which belongs not to the man, but to the descendant, and seems to be the outcome of centuries of command.

She uttered an exclamation, and slowly, and with seeming reluctance, turned the key in the lock. It grated, and the door opened. I caught a glimpse for an instant of her pale face and bright eyes, and then his Majesty, removing his hat, passed in and closed the door; and I withdrew to the farther end of the room, where madame continued to stand by the entrance.

I entertained a suspicion, I remember, and not unnaturally, that she had come to my lodging as her husband's spy; but her first words when I joined her dispelled this. "Quick!" she said with an imperious gesture. "Hear me, and let me go! I have waited long enough for you, and suffered enough through you. As for that woman in there, she is mad, and her servant too! Now, listen to me. You spoke to me honestly to-day, and I have come to repay you. You have an appointment with my husband to-morrow at Chaverny. Is it not so?" she added impatiently.

I replied that it was so.

"You are to go with one friend," she went on, tearing the glove she had taken off to strips in her excitement. "He is to meet you with one also?"

"Yes," I assented reluctantly, "at the bridge, madame."

"Then do not go," she rejoined emphatically. "Shame on me that I should betray

my husband! but it were worse to send an innocent man to his death. He will meet you with one sword only, according to his challenge, but there will be those under the bridge who will make certain work. There, I have betrayed him now!" she continued bitterly. "It is done. Let me go!"

"Nay, but, madame," I said, feeling more concerned for her, on whom from the first moment of meeting her I had brought nothing but misfortune, than surprised by this new treachery on his part, "will you not run some risk in returning to him? Is there nothing I can do for you—no step I can take for your protection?"

"None!" she said repellently and almost rudely, "except to speed my going."

"But you will not pass through the streets alone?"

She laughed so bitterly my heart ached for her. "The unhappy are always safe," she said.

Remembering how short a time it was since

I had surprised her in the first happiness of wedded love, I felt for her all the pity it was natural I should feel. But the responsibility under which his Majesty's presence and the charge of Mademoiselle laid me forbade me to indulge in the luxury of evincing my gratitude. Gladly would I have escorted her back to her home—even if I could not make that home again what it had been, or restore her husband to the pinnacle from which I had dashed him—but I dared not do this. I was forced to content myself with less, and was about to offer to send one of my men with her, when a hurried knocking at the outer door arrested the words on my lips.

Signing to her to stand still, I listened. The knocking was repeated, and grew each moment more urgent. There was a little grille, strongly wired, in the upper part of the door, and this I was about to open in order to learn what was amiss, when Simon's voice reached me from the farther side, imploring me to open the door quickly. Doubting the

lad's prudence, yet afraid to refuse lest I should lose some warning he had to give, I paused a second, and then undid the fastenings. The moment the door gave way he fell in bodily, crying out to me to bar it behind him. I caught a glimpse through the gap of a glare as of torches, and saw by this light half-a-dozen flushed faces in the act of rising above the edge of the landing. The men who owned them raised a shout of triumph at sight of me, and, clearing the upper steps at a bound, made a rush for the door. But in vain. We had just time to close it and drop the two stout bars. In a moment, in a second, the fierce outcry fell to a dull roar; and, safe for the time, we had leisure to look in one another's faces and learn the different aspects of alarm. Madame was white to the lips, while Simon's eyes seemed starting from his head, and he shook in every limb with terror.

At first, on my asking him what it meant, he could not speak. But that would not do; and I was in the act of seizing him by the

collar, to force an answer from him when the inner door opened, and the king came out, his face wearing an air of so much cheerfulness as proved both his satisfaction with Mademoiselle's story and his ignorance of all we were about. In a word, he had not yet taken the least alarm; but seeing Simon in my hands, and madame leaning against the well by the door like one deprived of life, he stood and cried out in surprise to know what it was.

"I fear we are besieged, sire," I answered desperately, feeling my anxieties increased a hundredfold by his appearance, "but by whom I cannot say. This lad knows, however," I continued, giving Simon a vicious shake, "and he shall speak. Now, trembler," I said to him, "tell your tale!"

"The Provost-Marshal!" he stammered, terrified afresh by the king's presence: for Henry had removed his mask. "I was on guard below. I had come up a few steps to be out of the cold, when I heard them enter. There are a round score of them."

I cried out a great oath, asking him why he had not gone up and warned Maignan, who with his men was now cut off from us in the rooms above. "You fool!" I continued, almost beside myself with rage, "if you had not come to this door they would have mounted to my rooms and beset them! What is this folly about the Provost-Marshal?"

"He is there," Simon answered, cowering away from me, his face working.

I thought he was lying, and had merely fancied this in his fright. But the assailants at this moment began to hail blows on the door, calling on us to open, and using such volleys of threats as penetrated even the thickness of the oak; driving the blood from the women's cheeks, and arresting the king's step in a manner which did not escape me. Among their cries I could plainly distinguish the words, "In the king's name!" which bore out Simon's statement.

At the moment I drew comfort from this, for if we had merely to deal with the law we

had that on our side which was above it. And I speedily made up my mind what to do. "I think the lad speaks the truth, sire," I said coolly. "This is only your Majesty's Provost-Marshal. The worst to be feared, therefore, is that he may learn your presence here before you would have it known. It should not be a matter of great difficulty, however, to bind him to silence, and if you will please to mask, I will open the grille and speak with him."

The king, who had taken his stand in the middle of the room, and seemed dazed and confused by the suddenness of the alarm and the uproar, assented with a brief word. Accordingly I was preparing to open the grille when Madame de Bruhl seized my arm, and forcibly pushed me back from it.

"What would you do?" she cried, her face full of terror. "Do you not hear? He is there."

"Who is there?" I said, startled more by her manner than her words.

"Who?" she answered, "who should be there? My husband! I hear his voice, I tell you! He has tracked me here! He has found me, and will kill me!"

"God forbid!" I said, doubting if she had really heard his voice. To make sure, I asked Simon if he had seen him; and my heart sank when I heard from him too that Bruhl was of the party. For the first time I became fully sensible of the danger which threatened us. For the first time, looking round the ill-lit room on the women's terrified faces, and the king's masked figure instinct with ill-repressed nervousness, I recognised how hopelessly we were enmeshed. Fortune had served Bruhl so well that, whether he knew it or not, he had us all trapped—alike the king whom he desired to compromise, and his wife whom he hated, Mademoiselle who had once escaped him, and I who had twice thwarted him. It was little to be wondered at if my courage sank as I looked from one to another, and listened to the ominous creaking of the door,

as the stout panels complained under the blows rained upon them. For my first duty, and that which took the *pas* of all others, was to the king—to save him harmless. How, then, was I to be answerable for Mademoiselle, how protect Madame de Bruhl?—how, in a word, redeem all those pledges in which my honour was concerned?

It was the thought of the Provost-Marshal which at this moment rallied my failing spirits. I remembered—until the mystery of his presence here in alliance with Bruhl was explained—there was no need to despair; and turning briskly to the king I begged him to favour me by standing with the women in a corner which was not visible from the door. He complied mechanically, and in a manner which I did not like; but lacking time to weigh trifles, I turned to the grille and opened it without more ado.

The appearance of my face at the trap was greeted with a savage cry of recognition, which subsided as quickly into silence. It

was followed by a momentary pushing to and fro among the crowd outside, which in its turn ended in the Provost-Marshal coming to the front. "In the king's name!" he said fussily.

"What is it?" I replied, eyeing rather the flushed, eager faces which scowled over his shoulders than himself. The light of two links, borne by some of the party, shone ruddily on the heads of the halberds, and, flaring up from time to time, filled all the place with wavering, smoky light. "What do you want?" I continued, "rousing my lodging at this time of night?"

"I hold a warrant for your arrest," he replied bluntly. "Resistance will be in vain. If you do not surrender I shall send for a ram to break in the door."

"Where is your order?" I said sharply. "The one you held this morning was cancelled by the king himself."

"Suspended only," he answered. "Suspended only. It was given out to me again

this evening for instant execution. And I am here in pursuance of it, and call on you to surrender."

"Who delivered it to you?" I retorted.

"M. de Villequier," he answered readily. "And here it is. Now, come, sir," he continued, "you are only making matters worse. Open to us."

"Before I do so," I said drily, "I should like to know what part in the pageant my friend M. de Bruhl, whom I see on the stairs yonder, proposes to play. And there is my old friend Fresnoy," I added. "And I see one or two others whom I know, M. Provost. Before I surrender I must know among other things what M. de Bruhl's business is here."

"It is the business of every loyal man to execute the king's warrant," the Provost answered evasively. "It is yours to surrender, and mine to lodge you in the Castle. But I am loth to have a disturbance. I will give you until that torch goes out, if you like, to make up your mind. At the end of

that time, if you do not surrender, I shall batter down the door."

"You will give the torch fair play?" I said, noting its condition.

He assented; and thanking him sternly for his indulgence, I closed the grille.

END OF VOL. II.