DUMAS ALEXANDRE

THE WAR OF WOMEN. VOLUME 1

Александр Дюма

The War of Women. Volume 1

Дюма А.

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

In "Twenty Years After" Dumas dealt with the earlier stages of the War of the Fronde, – the arrest of the three counsellors of the Parliament of Paris, Charton, Blancmesnil, and Broussel, the "day of barricades," of which the Abbé de Gondy, coadjutor to the Archbishop of Paris, afterwards Cardinal de Retz, claims to have been the author, and the flight of the queen regent, with the cardinal and the young king, to Saint-Germain. In the present volumes he reverts to the same extraordinary conflict at a later period, after several turns of the political kaleidoscope had taken place, and nearly all the prominent personages in the kingdom had changed sides again and again.

It will be remembered that the Prince de Condé, whose memorable victory at Lens was of the same year as the day of the barricades and the Peace of Westphalia, was among those who accompanied the queen and cardinal to Saint-Germain, and was then, and for some time thereafter, the commander-in-chief of the troops of the court party.

But when he had had the honor of escorting the court back to Paris in triumph, he amused himself by making sport of it. "Considering that he was not rewarded in proportion to his glory and his services," says Voltaire, "he was the first to ridicule Mazarin, to defy the queen, and insult the government he despised…

"No crime against the State could be imputed to Condé; nevertheless he was arrested at the Louvre, he and his brother Conti, and his brother-in-law Longueville, without ceremony, and simply because Mazarin feared them. The proceeding was, in truth, contrary to all laws, but laws were disregarded by all parties.

"The cardinal, to make himself master of the princes, resorted to a piece of knavery, which was called shrewd politics. The Frondeurs were accused of having made an attempt upon the Prince de Condé's life; Mazarin led him to believe that it was proposed to arrest one of the conspirators, and that it was advisable for his Highness, in order to deceive the Frondeurs, to sign the order for the gendarmes of the guard to be in readiness at the Louvre. Thus the great Condé himself signed the order for his own detention. There could be no better proof that politics often consists in lying, and that political cleverness consists in unearthing the liar.

"We read in the 'Life of the Duchesse de Longueville,' that the queen mother withdrew to her little oratory while the princes were being secured, that she bade the king, then eleven years of age, to fall upon his knees, and that they prayed earnestly together for the success of the undertaking…

"A striking proof of the manner in which events deceive men as to their results is afforded by the fact that the imprisonment of the three princes, which seemed likely to calm the factions, actually excited them to fever heat. The mother of the Prince de Condé, although exiled, remained in Paris, despite the court, and presented petition after petition to the Parliament. His wife, after passing through innumerable dangers, took refuge in the city of Bordeaux; with the assistance of the Ducs de La Rochefoucauld and Bouillon, she incited a revolt in that city, and enlisted the aid of Spain."[1]

The Memoirs of Cardinal de Retz, "the first French bishop to incite civil war upon any other than a religious pretext," are largely occupied with the diverse developments of this unique "war," so different from any other known to history, and in which, from beginning to end, – a period of five years, – he played so prominent a part. An extract or two from these memoirs will serve to show us that, as usual, Dumas' narrative adheres closely to the known facts of history.

[1] Siècle de Louis XIV., chap. V.

"The storm that was gathering" (after the arrest of the princes) "should have brought the cardinal to consider the state of affairs in Guyenne, of which the wretched administration of M. d'Épernon was the cause, and for which no other remedy could be found than to remove him from that government. A thousand private quarrels, half of which proceeded from the absurd chimera of his ignoble principality, had set him upon ill terms with the Parliament and the magistrates of Bordeaux, who were in most instances little wiser than he. Mazarin, who, in my opinion, was in this matter the maddest of them all, interested the royal authority in favor of M. d'Épernon, when a wise minister might have made both parties answerable for what had passed, without prejudice to the king, and rather to his advantage…

"On the day when … the news came that Messieurs de Bouillon and de la Rochefoucauld had carried safe into Bordeaux the Princesse de Condé and the young duke her son, whom the cardinal had left in her hands, instead of causing him to be brought up near the king, as Servien advised. The Parliament of Bordeaux, of which the wisest and oldest members used at that time to venture merrily at play at a single sitting all that they were worth … were not sorry that the people had allowed the young duke to enter their city, but they preserved a greater respect for the court than could have been expected, in view of their climate, and the ill-humor they were in against M. d'Épernon. They ordered that the Princesse de Condé, the duke her son, with Messieurs de Bouillon and de la Rochefoucauld should be given leave to remain at Bordeaux, provided that they would give their word to attempt nothing there against the king's service, and that in the mean time the Princesse de Condé's petition should be sent to his Majesty, with the humble remonstrance of the Parliament of Bordeaux touching the detention of the princes."

The cardinal's obstinate refusal to recall M. d'Épernon is alleged by the coadjutor to have been the cause of the continued recalcitrancy of the Parliament and people of Bordeaux, and of the consequent necessity of undertaking an expedition against the city.

"The king set out for Guyenne in the beginning of July… As soon as he reached the neighborhood of that province, M. de Saint-Simon, governor of Blaye, who had been wavering, came to court, and M. de la Force, who had been in treaty with M. de Bouillon, remained inactive… The deputies of the Parliament of Bordeaux came to meet the court at Libourne. They were commanded in a lofty tone to open the city gates for the king and his troops. They answered that it was one of their privileges to guard the person of their kings when they were in their city. The Maréchal de la Meilleraie advanced between the Dordogne and the Garonne; he took the castle of Vayre, where Pichon [Richon] commanded 300 men for the Parliament of Bordeaux, and the cardinal caused him to be hanged at Libourne very near the king's lodgings. M. de Bouillon, by way of reprisal, ordered an officer in M. de la Meilleraie's army, named Canolle, to be hanged likewise. Canolle was playing at cards with some ladies of the city, when he was told to prepare to die immediately."

Eventually Bordeaux was besieged in due form. "M. de Bouillon left nothing undone of what might be expected from a wise politician and a great general. M. de la Rochefoucauld signalized himself during all this siege, particularly at the defence of a half-moon, where the slaughter was great; but they were finally compelled to yield to superior force."

The capture of Bordeaux was followed by negotiations which resulted in a sort of peace, of which the terms were: "That a general amnesty should be granted to all, without exception, who had taken up arms and negotiated with Spain; that all troops should be disbanded save such as the king should choose to take into his pay; that the Princesse de Condé and her son should reside either upon one of her estates in Anjou or at Mouzon; and that M. d'Épernon should be deprived of the government of Guyenne."

Something less than a year later (February, 1651) the queen regent was forced to set the princes free, and to banish her first minister from the kingdom. Mazarin himself went to Havre, where the princes were then confined, and restored their liberty. "He was received by them," says Voltaire, "with the contempt he should have expected."

Condé returned to Paris, where his presence gave new life to the cabals and dissensions, and once more it was found that the step which was expected to put an end to the commotion, gave the signal for a renewal of the conflict with more bitterness than ever.

The character of the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, author of the celebrated "Maxims," in which he attributes the noblest actions of mankind to self-esteem, has baffled more than one chronicler, – among the rest, Cardinal de Retz, with whom he was always at enmity.

"There has always been something very mysterious in M. de La Rochefoucauld," says the coadjutor. "He never was fit for war, though an excellent soldier; neither was he ever of himself a good courtier, although he always had a great inclination to be so; he never was a good party-man, although all his life long involved in party conflicts."

Pierre Lenet, councillor of State, and *procureur-général* to the Parliament of Dijon, was the author of Memoirs, – "not so well known as their interest entitles them to be," says Voltaire, – in which he gave the history of the Prince de Condé from his birth in 1627 to the treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659.

The non-historical characters in the "War of Women," introduced to embellish and impart romantic flavor to a plot founded upon an incident which is in itself by no means devoid of the element of romance, include some of the most interesting and attractive of all Dumas' creations. Cauvignac, the Gascon adventurer, is, in respect to the qualities supposed to be most characteristic of the natives of Gascony, a worthy compeer of the immortal D'Artagnan. The lovely, high-spirited, and virtuous Vicomtesse de Cambes, and the equally lovely and high-spirited favorite of the Duc d'Épernon, meet upon common ground in their rivalry for the affection of Canolles. In Nanon de Lartigues, as in Olympe de Clèves, Dumas has shown that we need not always look in vain among women whose virtue is not without stain, for qualities of mind and heart deserving of respect.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Period, 1650.
ANNE OF AUSTRIA, Regent of France.
LOUIS XIV.
CARDINAL MAZARIN.
MARÉCHAL DE LA MEILLERAIE.
MADAME DE FRONSAC.
DUC D'ÉPERNON.
M. GUITAUT, Captain of the Queen's Guards.
Frondeurs:
PRINCE DE CONDÉ.
CLAIRE-CLÉMENCE DE MAILLÉ, PRINCESSE DE CONDÉ, his wife.
DUC D'ENGHIEN, son of the Prince de Condé.
CHARLOTTE DE MONTMORENCY, the Dowager Princesse de Condé.
PRINCE DE CONTI.
PRINCE DE LONGUEVILLE.
DUC DE BOUILLON.
DUC DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.
MARQUISE DE TOURVILLE.
CLAUDE RAOUL DE LESSAC, Comte de Clermont.
LOUIS-FERDINAND DE LORGES, Comte de Duras.
PIERRE LENET.
GÉRARD DE MONTALERT.
MONSIEUR RICHON, a soldier of fortune.
ESPAGNET, a Councillor of Parliament.
BARON DE RAVAILLY.
M. DE VIALAS, equerry to Princesse de Condé.
CLAIRE, Vicomtesse de Cambes.
BARON DE CANOLLES, Governor of the Île Saint-Georges.
M. DE VIBRAC, lieutenant to Canolles.
NANON DE LARTIGUES.
FRANCINETTE, her maid.
ROLAND CAUVIGNAC, Nanon's brother, captain of a troop of adventurers.
FERGUZON, his lieutenant.
BARRABAS, his sub-lieutenant.
ZÉPHÉRIN CARROTEL, sergeant in Cauvignac's troops.
BOURDELOT, physician to the Dowager Princesse de Condé.
POMPÉE, intendant to Princesse de Condé.
LA ROUSSIÈRE, captain of the hunt to Princesse de Condé.
M. LAVIE, Avocat-Général at Bordeaux.
MADAME LAVIE, his wife.
MASTER RABODIN, an attorney.
FRICOTIN} Rabodin's clerks
CHALUMEAU}
CASTORIN, servant to Canolles.
COURTAVAUX, servant to le Duc d'Épernon.
MASTER BISCARROS, landlord of the Golden Calf.

PIERROT, foster-brother to Duc d'Enghien.
THE GOVERNOR of Château-Trompette Prison.
M. D'ORGEMONT, his lieutenant.

NANON DE LARTIGUES

I

At a short distance from Libourne, the bright and bustling city mirrored in the swift waters of the Dordogne, between Fronsac and Saint-Michel-la-Rivière, once stood a pretty little white-walled, red-roofed village, half-hidden by sycamores, lindens, and beeches. The high-road from Libourne to Saint-André-de-Cubzac passed through the midst of its symmetrically arranged houses, and formed the only landscape that they possessed. Behind one of the rows of houses, distant about a hundred yards, wound the river, its width and swiftness at this point indicating the proximity of the sea.

But the civil war passed that way; first of all it up-rooted the trees, then depopulated the houses, which, being exposed to all its capricious fury, and being unable to fly like their occupants, simply crumbled and fell to pieces by the roadside, protesting in their way against the savagery of intestine warfare. But little by little the earth, which seems to have been created for the express purpose of serving as the grave of everything upon it, covered the dead bodies of these houses, which were once filled with joyous life; lastly, the grass sprang up in this artificial soil, and the traveller who to-day wends his way along the solitary road is far from suspecting, as he sees one of the vast flocks which one encounters at every turn in the South cropping the grass upon the uneven surface, that sheep and shepherd are walking over the burial-place of a whole village. But, at the time of which we are speaking, that is to say about the month of May, 1650, the village in question lay along both sides of the road, which, like a mammoth artery, nourished it with luxuriant vegetation and overflowing life. The stranger who happened to pass along the road at that epoch would have taken pleasure in watching the peasants harness and unharness the horses from their carts, the fishermen along the hank pulling in their nets wherein the white and red fish of the Dordogne were dancing about, and the smiths striking sturdy blows upon the anvil, and sending forth at every stroke of the hammer a shower of sparks which lighted up the forge. However, the thing which would most have delighted his soul, especially if his journeying had given him that appetite which has become a proverbial attribute of travellers, would have been a long, low building, about five hundred yards outside the village, a building consisting of a ground-floor and first floor only, exhaling a certain vapor through its chimney, and through its windows certain odors which indicated, even more surely than the figure of a golden calf painted upon a piece of red iron, which creaked upon an iron rod set at the level of the first floor, that he had finally reached one of those hospitable establishments whose proprietors, in consideration of a certain modest recompense, undertake to restore the vigor of the tired wayfarer.

Will some one tell me why this hostelry of the Golden Calf was located five hundred yards from the village, instead of taking up its natural position amid the smiling houses grouped on either side of the road?

In the first place, because the landlord, notwithstanding the fact that his talents were hidden in this out-of-the-way corner of the world, was in culinary matters an artist of the first rank. Now, if he displayed his sign at any point between the beginning and the end of the two long lines of houses which formed the village, he ran the risk of being confounded with one of the wretched pot-house keepers whom he was forced to acknowledge as his confrères, but whom he could not bring himself to regard as his equals; while, on the contrary, by isolating himself he more easily attracted the notice of connoisseurs, who, having once tasted the delicacies that came from his kitchen, would say to others: —

"When you are going from Libourne to Saint-André-de-Cubzac, or from Saint-André-de-Cubzac to Libourne, do not fail to stop, for breakfast, dinner, or supper, at the Golden Calf, just outside the little village of Matifou."

And the connoisseurs would follow this counsel, would leave the inn well-content, and send other connoisseurs thither; so that the knowing Boniface gradually made his fortune, nor did that prevent him, strange to say, from continuing to maintain the high gastronomic reputation of his establishment; all of which goes to prove, as we have already said, that Master Biscarros was a true artist.

On one of those lovely evenings in the month of May, when Nature, already awakened from her winter's sleep in the South, is beginning to awake in the North, a denser vapor and more savory odor than usual was escaping from the chimneys and windows of the Golden Calf, while Master Biscarros in person, dressed in white, according to the immemorial custom of sacrificers of all times and of all countries, was standing in the doorway, plucking with his august hands partridges and quail, destined to grace the festive hoard at one of those dainty repasts which he was so skilful in preparing, and which he was accustomed, as a result of his love for his art, to superintend personally to the smallest detail.

The day was drawing to a close; the waters of the Dordogne, which, in one of the tortuous windings wherein its course abounds, turned aside from the road at this point, and washed the base of the little fort of Vayres, a fourth of a league away, were beginning to turn white beneath the dark foliage. A sense of tranquil melancholy overspread the landscape with the upspringing of the evening breeze; the laborers were toiling to their homes beside their horses, and the fishers with their dripping nets; the noises in the village died away; the hammer having struck its final stroke upon the anvil, bringing to its close another day, the nightingale began to raise his voice among the trees hard by.

At the first notes which escaped from the throat of the feathered warbler, Master Biscarros too began to sing, – to accompany him no doubt; the result of this rivalry and of the interest of Master Biscarros in the work he had in hand was that he did not perceive a small party of six horsemen, who appeared upon the outskirts of the village of Matifou, and rode toward his inn.

But an exclamation at one of the windows of the first floor, and the sudden noisy closing of that window caused the worthy inn-keeper to raise his head; thereupon he saw that the horseman at the head of the party was riding directly toward him.

"Directly" is not altogether the appropriate word, and we hasten to correct ourselves; for the man halted every few steps, darting keen glances to right and left, scrutinizing by-paths, trees, and bushes, holding a carbine upon his knee with one hand, to be ready for attack or defence, and from time to time motioning to his companions, who followed his movements in every point, to come on. Then he would venture forward a few steps, and the same manœuvres would be repeated.

Biscarros followed the horseman with his eyes, so deeply engrossed in his extraordinary mode of progression that he entirely forgot to detach from the fowl's body the bunch of feathers which he held between his thumb and forefinger.

"That gentleman is looking for my house," said Biscarros to himself. "He is short-sighted doubtless, for my *golden calf* is freshly painted, and the sign projects a good way. However, I'll place myself where he'll see me."

And Master Biscarros planted himself in the middle of the road, where he continued to pluck his partridge with much freedom and majesty of gesture.

This step produced the anticipated result; the cavalier no sooner spied the worthy inn-keeper than he rode up to him, and said, with a courteous salutation: —

"Your pardon, Master Biscarros, but have you not seen hereabout a party of soldiers, who are friends of mine, and should be looking for me? 'Soldiers' is perhaps too strong a word; 'gentlemen of the sword' is better, or best of all, 'armed men,' – yes, armed men, that expresses my meaning. Have you seen a small party of armed men?"

Biscarros, flattered beyond measure to be called by his name, affably returned the salutation; he had not noticed that the stranger, with a single glance at the inn, had read the name and profession of the proprietor upon the sign, as he now read his identity upon his features.

"As to armed men," he replied, after a moment's reflection, "I have seen only one gentleman and his squire, who stopped at my house about an hour ago."

"Oho!" exclaimed the stranger, caressing his chin, which was almost beardless, although his face was already instinct with virility; "oho! there is a gentleman and his squire here in your inn, and both armed, you say?"

"*Mon Dieu!* yes, monsieur; shall I send word to him that you wish to speak to him?"

"Would it be altogether becoming?" rejoined the stranger. "To disturb a person whom one doesn't know is somewhat too familiar usage, perhaps, especially if the unknown is a person of rank. No, no, Master Biscarros, be good enough to describe him to me, and let it go at that; or, better still, show him to me without letting him see me."

"It would be difficult to show him to you, monsieur, for he seems anxious to keep out of sight; he closed his window the moment you and your companions appeared upon the road. To describe him to you is a simpler matter: he is a slender youth, fair-haired and delicate, hardly more than sixteen; he seems to have just about enough strength to carry the little parlor sword which hangs at his baldric."

The stranger knit his brow as if searching his memory.

"Ah, yes!" said he, "I know whom you mean, – a light-haired, effeminate young dandy, riding a Barbary horse, and followed by an old squire, stiff as the knave of spades: he's not the man I seek."

"Ah! he's not the man monsieur seeks?" Biscarros repeated.

"No."

"Very good: pending his arrival whom monsieur seeks, as he cannot fail to pass this way, there being no other road, I trust that monsieur and his friends will enter my humble inn, and take some refreshment."

"No. I have simply to thank you, and to ask what time it might be."

"Six o'clock is just striking on the village clock, monsieur; don't you hear the loud tones of the bell"?"

"Tis well. Now, Monsieur Biscarros, one last service."

"With pleasure."

"Tell me, please, how I can procure a boat and boatman."

"To cross the river?"

"No, to take a sail upon the river."

"Nothing easier: the fisherman who supplies me with fish – Are you fond of fish, monsieur?" queried Biscarros, parenthetically, returning to his first idea of persuading the stranger to sup beneath his roof.

"It's not the most toothsome of delicacies, monsieur; however, when properly seasoned it's not to be despised."

"I always have excellent fish, monsieur."

"I congratulate you, Master Biscarros; but let us return to the man who supplies you."

"To be sure; at this hour his day's work is at an end, and he is probably dining. You can see his boat from here, moored to the willows yonder just below the large elm. His house is hidden in the osier-bed. You will surely find him at table.

"Thanks, Master Biscarros, thanks," said the stranger.

Motioning to his companions to follow him, he rode rapidly away toward the clump of trees and knocked at the door of the little cabin. The door was opened by the fisherman's wife.

As Master Biscarros had said, the fisherman was at table.

"Take your oars," said the horseman, "and follow me; there's a crown to be earned."

The fisherman rose with a degree of precipitation that was most eloquent of the hard bargains mine host of the Golden Calf was wont to drive.

"Do you wish to go down the river to Vayres?" he asked.

"No; simply to go out into midstream, and remain there a few moments."

The fisherman stared at his customer's exposition of this strange whim; but, as there was a crown at the end of it, and as he could see, some twenty yards away, the dark forms of the other horsemen, he made no objection, thinking that any indication of unwillingness on his part might lead to the use of force, and that, in the struggle, he would lose the proffered recompense.

He therefore made haste to say to the stranger that he was at his service, with his boat and his oars.

The little troop thereupon at once guided their horses toward the river, and, while their leader kept on to the water's edge, halted at the top of the bank, in such a position, as if they feared to be taken by surprise, that they could see in all directions. They had an uninterrupted view of the plain behind them, and could also cover the embarkation about to take place at their feet.

Thereupon the stranger, who was a tall, light-haired young man, pale and rather thin, nervous in his movements, and with a bright, intelligent face, although there were dark rings around his blue eyes, and a cynical expression played about his lips, – the stranger, we say, examined his pistols with particular attention, slung his carbine over his shoulder, made sure that his long rapier moved easily in its sheath, and then gazed attentively at the opposite shore, – a broad expanse of plain, intersected by a path which ran in a straight line from the bank to the hamlet of Isson; the dark church-spire and the smoke from the houses could be distinguished through the golden evening haze.

Also on the other bank, scarcely an eighth of a league distant, stood the little fort of Vayres.

"Well," said the stranger, beginning to lose patience, and addressing his companions on the bank, "is he coming; can you see him anywhere, to right or left, before or behind?"

"I think," said one of the men, "that I can make out a dark group on the Isson road; but I am not quite sure, for the sun's in my eyes. Wait! Yes, yes, there are one, two, three, four, five men, led by a laced hat and blue cloak. It must be the man we expect, attended by an escort for greater safety."

"He has the right to bring an escort," rejoined the stranger, phlegmatically. "Come and take my horse, Ferguzon."

The man to whom this command was addressed, in a half-familiar, half-imperative tone, obeyed at once, and rode down the bank. Meanwhile the stranger alighted, and when the other joined him, threw his bridle over his arm, and prepared to go aboard the boat.

"Look you," said Ferguzon, laying his hand upon his arm, "no useless foolhardiness, Cauvignac; if you see the slightest suspicious movement on your man's part, begin by putting a bullet through his brain; you see that the crafty villain has brought a whole squadron with him."

"True, but not so strong as ours. So we have the advantage in numbers as well as in courage, and need fear nothing. Ah! their heads are beginning to show."

"Gad! what are they going to do?" said Ferguzon. "They can't procure a boat. Ah! faith, there is one there as by magic."

"It's my cousin, the Isson ferry-man," said the fisherman, who evinced a keen interest in these preliminaries, and was in terror lest a naval battle was about to take place between his own craft and his cousin's.

"Good! there the blue-coat steps aboard," said Ferguzon; "and alone, by my soul! – strictly according to the terms of the treaty."

"Let us not keep him waiting," said the stranger; and leaping into the skiff he motioned to the fisherman to take his station.

"Be careful, Roland," said Ferguzon, recurring to his prudent counsel. "The river is broad; don't go too near the other shore, to be greeted with a volley of musket-balls that we can't return; keep on this side of the centre if possible."

He whom Ferguzon called now Roland, and again Cauvignac, and who answered to both names, doubtless because one was the name by which he was baptized, and the other his family name, or his *nom de guerre*, nodded assentingly.

"Never fear," he said, "I was just thinking of that; it's all very well for them who have nothing to take rash chances, but this business promises too well for me foolishly to run the risk of losing all the fruit of it; so if there is any imprudence committed on this occasion, it won't be by me. Off we go, boatman!"

The fisherman cast off his moorings, thrust his long pole into the watergrass, and the boat began to move away from the bank, at the same time that the Isson ferry-man's skiff put off from the opposite shore.

There was, near the centre of the stream, a little stockade, consisting of three stakes surmounted by a white flag, which served to point out to the long lighters going down the Dordogne the location of a dangerous cluster of rocks. When the water was running low, the black, slippery crest of the reef could be seen above the surface; but at this moment, when the Dordogne was full, the little flag, and a slight ripple in the water alone indicated its presence.

The two boatmen seemed by a common impulse to have fixed upon that spot as a convenient one for the interview between the two flags of truce, and both pulled in that direction; the ferry-man reached the flag first, and in accordance with his passenger's orders made his skiff fast to one of the rings in the stockade.

At that moment the fisherman turned to his passenger to take his orders, and was not a little surprised to find a masked man, closely wrapped in his cloak. Upon that discovery his feeling of dread, which had never left him, redoubled, and his voice trembled as he asked this strange personage what course he wished him to take.

"Make your boat fast to yonder piece of wood," said Cauvignac, pointing to one of the stakes, "and as near monsieur's boat as possible."

The boatman obeyed, and the two craft, brought close together by the current, permitted the plenipotentiaries to hold the following conference.

II

"What! you wear a mask, monsieur?" exclaimed the new-comer in a tone of surprise not unmixed with vexation. He was a stout man of some fifty-five to fifty-eight years, with the stern, glaring eye of a bird of prey, and a grizzly moustache and royale; although he wore no mask, he concealed his hair and his features as much as possible beneath a huge laced hat, and his figure and his clothes beneath a blue cloak of ample proportions.

Cauvignac, upon obtaining a view at close quarters of the individual who addressed him, could not restrain an involuntary movement of surprise.

"Well, well, monsieur, what's the matter?" demanded he of the blue cloak.

"Nothing, monsieur; I nearly lost my balance. I believe that you did me the honor of addressing me. What were you saying, pray?"

"I asked you why you are masked."

"That is a plain question," said the young man, "and I will reply with equal frankness; I am masked in order to conceal my face."

"Then it is a face that I know?"

"I think not; but having seen it once you might know it again later; and that, in my opinion, would be utterly useless."

"I should say that you were quite as outspoken as myself."

"Yes, when outspokenness can do me no harm.

"Does your frankness go so far as to lead you to disclose the secrets of others?"

"Why not, if such disclosure can be of advantage to me?"

"It's a singular profession that you practise."

"*Dame!* one does what one can do, monsieur; I have been, in succession, lawyer, doctor, soldier, and partisan; you see that I am not likely to go begging for a trade."

"What are you now?"

"Your humble servant," said the young man, bowing respectfully.

"Have you the letter in question?"

"Have you the blank signature?"

"Here it is."

"Shall we make the exchange?"

"One moment, monsieur," said the stranger in the blue cloak; "your conversation is delightful to me, and I should be sorry to lose my enjoyment of it so soon."

"Good lack! monsieur, it is quite at your service, as I myself am," rejoined Cauvignac. "Let us talk, by all means, if it is agreeable to you."

"Shall I step into your boat, or do you prefer to come aboard mine, so that our boatmen may be out of ear-shot in the other boat?"

"Useless, monsieur; you speak some foreign tongue, no doubt?"

"I can speak Spanish."

"And I; let us talk in Spanish, then, if you please."

"By all means! What motive," continued the gentleman, adopting from that moment the idiom agreed upon, "led you to inform the Duc d'Épernon of the infidelity of the lady in question?"

"I was desirous to be of service to that eminent nobleman, and to get into his good graces."

"Have you any ill-will to Mademoiselle de Lartigues?"

"Ill-will? By no manner of means! On the contrary, I must admit that I am under some obligation to her, and I should be extremely sorry were any mishap to befall her."

"Then Monsieur le Baron de Canolles is your enemy?"

"I never saw him; I know him only by reputation, and I must say that he is said to be a gallant knight and worthy gentleman."

"I am to understand that your action is not induced by hatred of any person?"

"Go to! if I had a grievance against Baron de Canolles I should challenge him to exchange shots or sword-thrusts with me, and he is too much of a man ever to decline an invitation of that kind."

"In that case I must recur to the reason you have given me."

"I think you can do no better."

"Very good! I understand that you have the letter which proves Mademoiselle de Lartigues to be unfaithful."

"Here it is. No offence, but this is the second time I have shown it to you."

The older gentleman glanced sadly from afar at the dainty paper, through which he could see the written characters.

The young man slowly unfolded the letter.

"You recognize the writing, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Then give me the blank signature, and you shall have the letter."

"In a moment. Will you allow me to ask you a question?"

"Ask it, monsieur."

The young man tranquilly folded the paper again, and replaced it in his pocket.

"How did you procure the letter?"

"I am quite willing to tell you."

"I am listening."

"You know that the somewhat extravagant government of the Duc d'Épernon has aroused a strong feeling against him in Guyenne?"

"Very well; go on."

"You know that the frightfully stingy government of Monsieur de Mazarin has aroused a tremendously strong feeling against him in the capital?"

"What have Monsieur de Mazarin and Monsieur d'Épernon to do with the matter?"

"One moment; these two strongly contrasted governments have produced a state of things much resembling a general war, in which every one has a share. At this moment Monsieur de Mazarin is fighting for the queen; you are fighting for the king; the coadjutor is fighting for Monsieur de Beaufort; Monsieur de Beaufort is fighting for Madame de Montbazon; Monsieur de La Rochefoucauld is fighting for Madame de Longueville; Monsieur le Duc d'Orléans is fighting for Mademoiselle Soyon; the Parliament is fighting for the people; lastly, Monsieur de Condé, who was fighting for France, has been imprisoned. Now I, who have no great stake to gain by fighting for the queen, for the king, for the coadjutor, for Monsieur de Beaufort, for Madame de Montbazon, for Madame de Longueville, for Mademoiselle Soyon, for the people, or for France, conceived the scheme of espousing no party whatever, but of following the one which I feel inclined to follow at the moment. Thus with me it is a question of expediency pure and simple. What say you to the idea?"

"It is ingenious, certainly."

"Consequently I have levied an army. You can see it drawn up yonder on the bank of the Dordogne."

"Five men? Nonsense!"

"That's one more than you have yourself; it doesn't look well, therefore, for you to treat it with contempt."

"Very ill clad," continued the older man, who was in ill-humor, and for that reason inclined to be censorious.

"True," rejoined his interlocutor, "they somewhat resemble the companions of Falstaff. Falstaff, by the way, is an English gentleman of my acquaintance. But to-night they will be newly equipped, and if you fall in with them to-morrow, you will admit that they are pretty fellows."

"Let us return to yourself. I am not concerned with your men."

"Very well; as I was saying, in the course of my warfare on my own account, we fell in with the tax-collector of this district, who was going from village to village, rounding out his Majesty's purse. So long as there was a single stiver uncollected we did escort duty for him faithfully, and I confess that, as I watched his money-bags filling, I was strongly tempted to join the king's faction. But the infernal confusion that reigned everywhere, together with a fit of spleen against Monsieur de Mazarin, and the complaints that we heard on all sides against Monsieur d'Épernon, brought us to our senses. We concluded that there was much to be said in favor of the justice of the princes' cause, and we embraced it with ardor; the collector completed his round of visits at the little house which stands by itself yonder among the poplars and sycamores."

"Nanon's house!" muttered the other; "yes, I see it."

"We watched until he came out, we followed him as we had been doing for five days, we crossed the Dordogne with him just below Saint-Michel, and when we were in midstream I told him of our conversion politically, and requested him, with all the courtesy of which I am capable, to turn over to us the cash in his possession. Would you believe, monsieur, that he refused? Thereupon, my comrades searched him, and as he was shrieking in a way to cause scandal, my lieutenant, a resourceful rascal, – you see him yonder, in a red cloak, holding my horse, – reflected that the water, by intercepting the air-currents, interfered with the continuity of sound; that is an axiom in physics which I, as a physician, understood and applauded. The author of the suggestion thereupon bent the recalcitrant tax-collector's head over toward the river, and held it a foot – no more – under water. As a matter of fact he ceased to shout, or, to put it more accurately, we ceased to hear him. We were able, therefore, to seize in the name of the princes all the money in his possession, and the correspondence which had been intrusted to him. I gave the money to my soldiers, who, as you justly observed, need to be newly equipped, and I kept the papers, this one among others: it seems that the worthy collector acted as Mercury for Mademoiselle de Lartigues."

"Indeed," muttered the old gentleman, "he was a creature of Nanon's if I mistake not. What became of the wretch?"

"Ah! you will see whether we did well to dip the wretch, as you call him, in the river. Why, except for that precaution he would have aroused the whole country. Fancy, when we took him out of the water, although he had been there hardly quarter of an hour, he was dead with rage!"

"You plunged him in again, no doubt?"

"As you say."

"But if the messenger was drowned – "

"I didn't say that he was drowned."

"Let us not haggle over words; if the messenger is dead – "

"Oh! as to that, he's dead enough."

"Monsieur de Canolles will not have received the letter, of course, and consequently will not keep the appointment."

"Oh! one moment; I make war on powers, not on private individuals. Monsieur de Canolles received a duplicate of the letter making the appointment; but as I considered that the autograph manuscript was of some value, I retained it."

"What will he think when he fails to recognize the writing?"

"That the person who hungers for a sight of him has employed another hand, as a measure of precaution."

The stranger eyed Cauvignac in evident admiration of such unbounded impudence combined with such perfect self-possession. He was determined, if possible, to find some means of frightening the reckless swashbuckler.

"What about the government," he said, "and the investigations that may be set on foot? Do you never think of that?"

"Investigations?" rejoined the younger man, with a laugh. "Oh! Monsieur d'Épernon has many other things to do besides investigate; and then, did I not tell you that I did what I did for the purpose of obtaining his favor? He would be ungrateful indeed if he didn't bestow it on me."

"I don't altogether understand," said the other, satirically, "how it ever occurred to you, who have, by your own admission, taken up the cause of the princes, to do Monsieur d'Épernon a service."

"And yet it's the simplest thing in the world: an inspection of the papers found upon the collector convinced me of the purity of the king's intentions; his Majesty is entirely justified in my eyes, and Monsieur le Duc d'Épernon is in the right a thousand times over as against his subordinates. That, therefore, is the just cause, and thereupon I embraced the just cause."

"Here's a scoundrel whom I will have hanged if he ever falls into my hands!" growled the old gentleman, pulling savagely at the ends of his bristly moustache.

"I beg your pardon?" said Cauvignac, winking under his mask.

"I said nothing. Let me ask you a question; what do you propose to do with the signature in blank which you demand?"

"Deuce take me if I've made up my mind! I asked for a signature in blank, because it is the most convenient thing, the easiest to carry, and the most elastic. It is probable that I shall keep it for some great emergency; but it is possible that I may throw it away on the first whim that comes to my mind; perhaps I may present it to you in person before the end of the week, perhaps it will not come back to you for three or four months, and then with a dozen or more endorsers, like a piece of commercial paper; but never fear, I shall not use it for any purpose for which you and I need blush. Noble blood counts for something, after all."

"You are of noble blood?"

"Yes, monsieur, the very noblest."

"In that case I will have him broken on the wheel," muttered the unknown; "that's the service his blank signature will do him!"

"Have you decided to give me the signature in blank?" asked Cauvignac.

"I must," was the reply.

"I don't force you to do it; let us understand each other. What I propose is an exchange; keep your paper if you choose, and I will keep mine."

"The letter?"

"The signature?"

And he held out the letter with one hand, while he cocked a pistol with the other.

"Don't disturb the repose of your pistol," said the stranger, throwing open his cloak; "for I have pistols, too, and they are all loaded. Fair play on both sides; here's your signature."

The exchange of documents was effected without further parley, and each of the parties examined that which was handed to him, carefully and in silence.

"Now, monsieur," said Cauvignac, "in which direction do you go?"

"I must cross to the right bank."

"And I to the left."

"How shall we arrange it? My men are where you propose to go, and yours where I propose to go."

"Why, nothing could be simpler; send my men over to me in your boat, and I will send yours over in mine."

"You have an inventive mind, and one that works very quickly."

"I was born to command an army."

"And so you do."

"Ah! true, I had forgotten," said the young man.

The stranger motioned to the ferry-man to cast off his boat, and pull to the opposite shore in the direction of the clump of woods which reached to the road.

The young man, who was perhaps expecting some treachery, stood half erect to look after him, with his hand still resting on the butt of his pistol, ready to fire at the least suspicious movement on the stranger's part. But the latter did not even deign to notice the distrust of which he was the object, and, turning his back on the young man with real or affected indifference, began to read the letter, and was soon entirely engrossed in its contents.

"Remember the hour," Cauvignac called after him; "eight o'clock this evening."

The stranger made no reply, and did not seem to have heard.

"Ah!" said Cauvignac to himself, caressing the butt of his pistol: "to think that, if I chose, I might throw open the succession to the government of Guyenne, and stop the civil war! But, with the Duc d'Épernon dead, what good would his signature in blank do me? and with the civil war at an end, what should I live on? Upon my word, there are times when I believe I am going mad. Vive le Duc d'Épernon and the civil war! – Come, boatman, to your oars, and pull to the other shore; we must not keep the worthy man waiting for his escort."

In a few moments Cauvignac approached the left bank of the Dordogne, just as the old gentleman was sending Ferguzon and his five bandits over to him in the ferry-man's boat. As he did not choose to be less prompt than he, he ordered his boatman to take the stranger's four men in his boat, and put them ashore on the other bank. In midstream the two boats met, and the occupants saluted one another courteously, as they passed on toward the point where their respective leaders were awaiting them. The old gentleman thereupon, with his escort, disappeared among the trees which stretched from the river-bank to the high-road; and Cauvignac, at the head of his army, took the path leading to Isson.

III

Half an hour after the scene we have described, the same window in Master Biscarros' hostelry which had been closed so suddenly was cautiously re-opened, and a young man of some sixteen or eighteen years, dressed in black, with sleeves puffed at the wrists, in the fashion of that day, rested his elbows on the window-sill, after carefully scrutinizing the road to right and left. A shirt of the finest linen protruded proudly from his doublet, and fell in wavy folds over his beribboned small-clothes. His small, slender hand, a true thoroughbred hand, toyed impatiently with his buckskin gloves, embroidered along the seams; a pearl-gray felt hat, surmounted by a magnificent blue feather, shaded his long, golden-chestnut locks, which formed a marvellously fitting frame for an oval face, with fair complexion, rosy lips, and black eyebrows. But truth compels us to state that this attractive ensemble, which was well adapted to make the youth one of the most charming of cavaliers, was for the moment ever so little clouded by an expression of ill-humor, caused no doubt by a season of profitless waiting; for he gazed with dilated eye along the road, which was already swimming in the evening mist.

In his impatience he struck his left hand with his gloves. At the sound, the landlord, who was plucking his last partridge, raised his head, and said, removing his cap, —

"At what hour will you sup, my young sir? We are only awaiting your orders to serve you."

"You know that I do not sup alone, but am awaiting a friend; when you see him coming, you may serve the supper."

"Ah, monsieur," rejoined Master Biscarros, "I wouldn't presume to censure your friend, for he is certainly free to come or not; but it's a very bad habit to keep people waiting."

"He has no such habit, and I am much surprised at his tardiness."

"I am something more than surprised, monsieur; I am deeply grieved, for the joint will be burned."

"Take it off the spit."

"Then it will be cold."

"Put another to the fire."

"It won't be cooked."

"In that case, my friend, do as you please," said the youth, unable, notwithstanding his ill-humor, to refrain from smiling at the inn-keeper's despair: "I intrust the matter to your supreme wisdom."

"There is no wisdom, not even King Solomon's own, that would make a warmed-over dinner eatable."

Having propounded that axiom, which Boileau was to express in verse twenty years later, Master Biscarros, shaking his head sadly, entered the inn.

Thereupon the youth, as if to cheat his impatience, drew back into the chamber, and was heard for a moment or two stamping noisily back and forth across the floor; but almost immediately, thinking that he heard horses' footsteps in the distance, he rushed to the window again.

"At last!" he cried; "there he is! God be praised!"

As he spoke, the head of a mounted man appeared beyond the thicket where the nightingale was singing, to whose melodious notes the young man seemed to pay no attention, doubtless because of his intense preoccupation. To his great astonishment, he waited in vain for the horseman to come out upon the road, for he turned to the right and rode in among the bushes, where his hat soon disappeared, – an unmistakable indication that he had alighted. A moment later the watcher saw through the branches, as they were cautiously put aside, a gray helmet, and the last rays of the setting sun were reflected on a musket-barrel.

The young man remained at his window lost in thought; evidently the man hiding in the thicket was not the friend he expected, and the impatient expression which darkened his mobile features gave place to an expression of curiosity.

Soon a second hat appeared beside the first, and the young man drew back out of sight.

The same gray helmet, the same glistening musket-barrel, the same manœuvring in the thicket. The new arrival addressed some words to the other, which the watcher could not hear because of the distance; and, in consequence doubtless of the information he received, he plunged into the hedge which ran parallel to the thicket, crouched behind a rock, and waited.

From his elevated position the young man could see his hat above the rock. Beside the hat gleamed a luminous point, – it was the end of the musket-barrel.

A feeling of terror took possession of the young gentleman's mind, and he drew back farther and farther as he watched.

"Oho!" he thought, "I wonder if they have designs on me and the thousand louis I have with me. But no; for, even if Richon comes, so that I can go on this evening, I am going to Libourne, and not to Saint-André-de-Cubzac, and so shall not pass the spot where those villains are in ambush. If my old Pompée were here, I would consult him. But what's this? If I'm not mistaken – yes, on my word, there are two more men! Gad! this has every appearance of an ambuscade in form."

He stepped still farther back, for it was true that at that moment two other horsemen appeared at the same point; but only one of these two wore the gray helmet. The other, astride a powerful black horse, and wrapped in the folds of an ample cloak, wore a hat trimmed with gold lace and adorned with a white feather; and beneath the cloak, as the evening breeze blew it aside, could be seen an abundance of rich embroidery upon a reddish doublet.

One would have said that the day was prolonging itself in order to light this scene, for the sun's last rays, as the luminary came forth from behind a bank of those dark clouds which sometimes stretch so picturesquely along the horizon at sundown, suddenly set ablaze a thousand rubies in the windows of a pretty little house, situated a hundred yards or less from the river, and which the young man would not otherwise have noticed, as it was in a great measure concealed by trees. This additional supply of light enabled him to see in the first place that the spies were watching the end of the village street and the little house with the shining windows, looking from one to the other; secondly, that the gray helmets seemed to have the greatest respect for the white feather; and lastly, that one of the windows in question was thrown open, and a woman appeared upon the balcony, looked about for a moment, as if she too were expecting some one, then re-entered the house as if she wished to avoid being seen.

As she disappeared, the sun sank behind the hill, and as it sank, the ground-floor of the house was immersed in darkness, and the light, gradually abandoning the windows, ascended to the slate roof, to disappear at last, after playing for a moment with a weather-vane consisting of a sheaf of golden arrows.

In the facts we have detailed there was ample material for any intelligent mind to build up a structure of probabilities, if not of certainties.

It was probable that the men were watching the isolated house, upon the balcony of which a woman had shown herself for an instant; it was probable that the woman and the men were expecting the arrival of one and the same person, but with very different intentions; it was probable that this person was to come from the village, and consequently to pass the inn, which was about half-way between the village and the thicket, as the thicket was about half-way between the inn and the house; it was probable that the horseman with the white feather was the leader of the horsemen with gray helmets, and, from the eagerness with which he stood up in his stirrups, in order to see farther, it was probable that he was jealous, and was watching in his own interest.

Just as the young man was concluding this chain of reasoning, the links of which fell naturally together in his mind, the door of his apartment opened and Master Biscarros appeared.

"My dear host," said the young man, without giving him time to explain the purpose of his visit, – a purpose which he guessed, however, "come hither, and tell me, if my question is not impertinent, whose is the small house which I see yonder, – a white speck among the poplars and sycamores."

The landlord followed with his eyes the direction in which the speaker's index finger pointed, and scratched his head.

"'Faith!" he replied, with a smile which he tried to render cunning, "sometimes it belongs to one person, sometimes to another; it's yours, if you have any reason for seeking solitude, whether you wish to conceal yourself, or simply to conceal some one else."

The young man blushed.

"But who lives there to-day?" he asked.

"A young lady who passes herself off for a widow, and whom the ghost of her first, and sometimes of her second husband, comes to visit from time to time. But there's one remarkable thing about it, and that is that the two ghosts seem to have an understanding with each other, and never return at the same time."

"Since when," asked the young man, with a smile, "has the fair widow occupied this house, which is so convenient for ghosts?"

"About two months. She keeps very much to herself, and no one, I think, can boast of having seen her during that time, for she goes out very rarely, and always heavily veiled. A little maid – a fascinating creature, on my word! – comes here every morning to order the meals for the day, and I send them to the house; she receives the dishes in the vestibule, pays handsomely for them, and shuts the door in the waiter's face. This evening, for example, there is a banquet on hand, and the partridge and quail you saw me plucking are for her."

"Whom does she entertain to-night?"

"One of the two ghosts I told you of, no doubt."

"Have you ever seen these ghosts?"

"Yes; but only passing along the road, after sunset, or before daylight."

"Nevertheless, I am sure that you have noticed them, dear Monsieur Biscarros; for, from the first word you spoke, I could see that you are a close observer. Come, what have you noticed in their appearance?"

"One is the ghost of a man of some sixty to sixty-five years; and that one I take to be the first husband, for it goes and comes like a ghost sure of the priority of its rights. The other is the ghost of a young man of twenty-six or twenty-eight, and this one is more timid, and has the appearance of a soul in torment; so I would swear that it's the ghost of the second husband."

"At what hour is the supper to be served to-night?"

"Eight o'clock."

"It is half after seven," said the young man, drawing from his fob a dainty little watch which he had already consulted several times; "you have no time to lose."

"Oh! it will be ready, never fear; but I came up to speak about your own, and to tell you that I have begun it all anew. So try, now, as your friend has delayed so long, to keep him away for another hour."

"Look you, my dear host," said the young gentleman, with the air of a man to whom the important question of a meal served at the proper moment was a secondary matter, "don't be disturbed about our supper, whenever the person whom I expect arrives, for we have much to talk about. If the supper isn't ready we will talk first; if it is ready, we will talk afterward."

"In good sooth, monsieur, you are a very accommodating gentleman, and since you are content to leave the matter in my hands, you shall not be disappointed; make your mind easy on that score."

Whereupon Master Biscarros made a low bow, to which the young man replied with a nod, and left the room.

"Now," said the young man to himself, resuming his station at the window with renewed interest, "I understand the whole affair. The lady is expecting somebody who is to come from Libourne, and the men in the bushes propose to accost him before he has time to knock at her door."

At that instant, as if to confirm the supposition of our sagacious observer, he heard the hoof-beats of a horse at his left. His eye instantly sought the thicket to observe the attitude of the men in ambush there. Although the darkness was beginning to obscure the different objects, it seemed to him that some of the men put aside the branches, while the others stood up to look over the rock, all alike preparing for a movement, which had every appearance of being an aggressive one. At the same time a sharp click, like the cocking of a musket, reached his ear thrice, and made him shudder. He at once turned in the opposite direction, to try and discern the person whose safety was menaced by that murderous sound, and spied a young man trotting briskly along upon a graceful, well-shaped horse. A handsome fellow he was, head erect, nose in air, and hand on hip, wearing a short cloak, lined with white satin, thrown gracefully over his right shoulder. Seen from a distance, he seemed to have a refined, poetic, joyous face. At closer quarters, it was seen to be a face with pure outlines, bright, clear complexion, keen eyes, lips slightly parted by the habit of smiling, a soft, black moustache, and fine, white teeth. A lordly way of twirling his switch, accompanied by a soft whistle, like that affected by the dandies of the epoch, following the fashion set by Monsieur Gaston d'Orléans, was not lacking, to make of the new-comer a perfect cavalier, according to the laws of good form then in vogue at the court of France, which was beginning to set the fashion for all the courts of Europe.

Fifty paces behind him, mounted upon a horse whose gait he regulated by that of his master's, rode an extremely consequential, high and mighty valet, who seemed to occupy a no less distinguished station among servants than his master among gentlemen.

The comely youth watching from the window of the inn, too young, doubtless, to look on in cold blood at such a scene as seemed imminent, could not restrain a shudder as he reflected that the two paragons who were approaching, with such absolute indifference and sense of security, would, in all probability, be shot down when they reached the spot where their foes were lying in ambush. A decisive conflict seemed to take place between the timidity natural at his age and his love for his neighbor. At last the generous sentiment carried the day, and as the gallant cavalier was riding by in front of the inn, without even looking toward it, the young man obeyed a sudden, irresistible impulse, leaned from the window, and cried, —

"Holé! monsieur, stop a moment, please, for I have something of importance to say to you."

At the sound of the voice, and the words which it uttered, the horseman raised his head, and seeing the young man at the window, stopped his horse with a movement of his hand which would have done honor to the best of squires.

"Don't stop your horse, monsieur, but ride toward me unconcernedly, as if you knew me."

The traveller hesitated a second; but realizing that he had to do with a gentleman of engaging countenance and pleasant manners, he removed his hat, and rode forward, smiling.

"Here I am, at your service, monsieur," he said; "what can I do for you?"

"Come still nearer, monsieur," continued he at the window; "or what I have to tell you cannot be told aloud. Put on your hat, for we must make them think that we are old acquaintances, and that you were coming to this inn to see me."

"But I don't understand, monsieur," said the traveller.

"You will understand directly; meanwhile put on your hat – good! Now come near, nearer! Give me your hand! That's it! Delighted to see you! Now listen; do not ride on beyond this inn, or you are lost!"

"What's the matter? Really, you terrify me," said the traveller, with a smile.

"The matter is that you are on your way to yonder little house where we see the light, are you not?"

The horseman started.

"Well, on the road to that house, at the bend in the road, in yonder dark thicket, four men are lying in wait for you."

"Oho!" exclaimed the traveller, gazing with all his eyes at the young man, who was quite pale. "Indeed! you are sure?"

"I saw them ride up, one after another, get down from their horses, and hide, – some behind the trees, others behind rocks. Lastly, when you rode out of the village just now, I heard them cock their muskets."

"The devil!" exclaimed the traveller, beginning to take alarm.

"Yes, monsieur, it's just as I tell you," continued the young man at the window; "if it were only not quite so dark you could see them, and perhaps recognize them."

"Oh! I have no need to see them; I know perfectly well who they are. But who told you that I was going to that house, monsieur, and that it is I they are watching for?"

"I guessed it."

"You are a very charming Œdipus; thanks! Ah! they propose to shoot me; how many of them are assembled for that praiseworthy purpose?"

"Four; one of whom seemed the leader."

"He is older than the others, is n't he?"

"Yes, as well as I could judge from here."

"Does he stoop?"

"He is round-shouldered, wears an embroidered doublet, white plume, brown cloak; his gestures are infrequent but imperative."

"As I thought; it's the Duc d'Épernon."

"The Duc d'Épernon!"

"Well, well, here I am telling you my business," said the traveller with a laugh. "I never do so with others; but no matter, you have done me so great a service that I don't care so much what I say to you. How are the men dressed who are with him?"

"Gray helmets."

"Just so; they are his staff-bearers."

"Become musket-bearers for to-day."

"In my honor; thanks! Now, do you know what you ought to do, my young gentleman?"

"No; but tell me your opinion, and if what I ought to do can be of any service to you, I am ready in advance to undertake it."

"You have weapons?"

"Why – yes; I have a sword."

"You have your servant?"

"Of course; but he is not here; I sent him to meet some one whom I expect."

"Very well; you ought to lend me a hand."

"To do what?"

"To charge the villains, and make them and their leader beg for mercy."

"Are you mad, monsieur?" cried the young man, in a tone which showed that he was not in the least inclined for such an expedition.

"Indeed, I ask your pardon," said the traveller; "I forgot that the affair had no interest for you."

Turning to his servant, who had halted when his master halted, he said, —

"Come here, Castorin!"

At the same time he put his hand to his holsters, as if to make sure that his pistols were in good condition.

"Ah, monsieur!" cried the young man at the window, putting out his arms as if to stop him, "monsieur, in Heaven's name do not risk your life in such an adventure! Rather come into the inn, and thereby avoid arousing the suspicion of the men who are waiting for you; consider that the honor of a woman is at stake."

"You are right," rejoined the horseman; "although, in this case, it's not her honor, precisely, but her material welfare. Castorin, my good fellow," he added, addressing his servant, who had joined him; "we will go no farther just now."

"What!" cried Castorin, almost as disappointed as his master, "what does monsieur say?"

"I say that Mademoiselle Francinette will have to do without the pleasure of seeing you this evening, as we shall pass the night at the Golden Calf; go in, therefore, order supper for me, and a bed to be got ready."

As he doubtless saw that Monsieur Castorin proposed to make some rejoinder, he accompanied his last words with a movement of the head which effectually precluded any more extended discussion. Castorin at once passed through the gate, crestfallen, and without venturing to say another word.

The traveller looked after him for an instant; then, after reflecting for another instant, seemed to have made up his mind what course to adopt. He alighted from his horse, passed through the gate on the heels of his lackey, over whose arm he threw his rein, entered the inn, and in two bounds was at the door of the room occupied by the young gentleman, who, when his door was suddenly thrown open, made an involuntary movement of surprise mingled with alarm, which the new-comer could not detect because of the darkness.

"And so," said the latter, approaching the young man with a jovial air, and cordially pressing a hand which was not offered him, "it's a settled fact that I owe you my life."

"Oh, monsieur, you exaggerate the service I have done you," said the young man, stepping back.

"No, no! no modesty; it's as I say. I know the duke, and he's an infernally brutal fellow. As for you, you are a model of perspicacity, a perfect phœnix of Christian charity. But tell me, my obliging and sympathetic friend, if you carried your thoughtfulness so far as to send word to the house."

"To what house?"

"*Pardieu!* to the house where I was going, – the house where I am expected."

"No," said the young man, "I did not think of it, I confess; and had I thought of it I had no way to do it. I have been here barely two hours myself, and I know no one in the house."

"The devil!" exclaimed the traveller with an anxious expression. "Poor Nanon! if only nothing happens to her."

"Nanon! Nanon de Lartigues!" exclaimed the young man in amazement.

"Upon my word! are you a sorcerer?" said the traveller. "You see men lying in wait by the roadside, and you divine whom they are waiting for; I mention a Christian name, and you divine the family name. Explain yourself at once, or I denounce you, and have you condemned to death at the stake by the parliament of Bordeaux!"

"Ah! but you surely will agree that one need not be very cunning to have solved that problem; once you had named the Duc d'Épernon as your rival, it was plain enough that if you named any Nanon whatsoever, it must be the beautiful, wealthy, and clever Nanon de Lartigues, by whom the duke is bewitched, so they say, and who really governs in his province; the result being that throughout Guyenne she is almost as bitterly detested as he is himself. And you were on your way to visit that woman?" the young man added, reproachfully.

"'Faith, yes, I confess it; and as I have called her name, I won't deny her. Besides, Nanon is misunderstood and slandered. She is a charming girl, faithful to her promises so long as she finds it agreeable to keep them, and devoted to the man she loves, so long as she loves him. I was to sup with her this evening, but the duke has upset the saucepan. Would you like me to present you to her to-morrow? Deuce take it! the duke must return to Agen sooner or later."

"Thanks," returned the young gentleman, dryly. "I know Mademoiselle de Lartigues by name only, and I have no desire for any further acquaintance with her."

"Well, you are wrong, *morbleu!* Nanon is a good person to know in every way."

The young man's brows contracted.

"Oho! I beg your pardon," said the astonished traveller; "but I thought that at your age – "

"I know that I am of an age at which such suggestions are ordinarily accepted," replied the other, noticing the bad effect his prudery seemed to have produced, "and I would gladly accept, were it not that I am simply a bird of passage here, and am compelled to continue my journey to-night."

"*Pardieu!* surely you will not go until I know the name of the gentle knight who so courteously saved my life?"

The young man hesitated for a moment before he replied, —

"I am the Vicomte de Cambes."

"Aha!" said his companion; "I have heard of a lovely Vicomtesse de Cambes, who has large estates near Bordeaux, and is a close friend of Madame la Princesse."

"She is a kinswoman of mine," said the young man, hastily.

"'Faith, viscount, I congratulate you, for they say that she is charming beyond compare. I hope you will present me to her, if the opportunity ever occurs. I am Baron de Canolles, captain in the Navailles regiment, and at present enjoying a leave of absence which Monsieur le Duc d'Épernon was pleased to grant me, at the recommendation of Mademoiselle de Lartigues."

"Baron de Canolles!" cried the viscount, gazing at his companion with the curiosity naturally aroused by that name, renowned in the love intrigues of the time.

"You know me?" said Canolles.

"By reputation only," the viscount replied.

"And by bad reputation, eh? What would you have? Every one follows his natural inclinations, and I love a life of excitement."

"You are perfectly free, monsieur, to live as you choose," rejoined the viscount. "Permit me, however, to express one thought that comes to my mind."

"What is it?"

"That there is a woman yonder, deeply compromised for your sake, upon whom the duke will wreak vengeance for his disappointment in your regard."

"The devil! do you think it?"

"Of course; although she is a somewhat frail person, Mademoiselle de Lartigues is a woman none the less, and compromised by you; it is for you to look to her safety."

"Gad! you are right, my young Nestor; and in the pleasure of conversing with you, I was near forgetting my obligations as a gentleman. We have been betrayed, and in all probability the duke knows all. It is very, true that Nanon is so clever that if she were warned in time, I would wager my life that she would make the duke apologize. Now let us see; are you acquainted with the art of war, young man?"

"Not yet," replied the viscount, with a laugh; "but I fancy I am likely to learn it where I am going."

"Well, here's your first lesson. In war, you know, when force is out of the question, we must resort to stratagem. Help me to carry out a stratagem."

"I ask nothing better. But in what way? Tell me."

"The inn has two doors."

"I know nothing about that."

"I know it; one that opens on the high-road, and another that opens into the fields. I propose to go out by the one that leads into the fields, describe a semi-circle, and knock at the back door of Nanon's house."

"Yes, so that you may be caught in the house!" cried the viscount. "You would make a fine tactician, upon my word!"

"Caught in the house?" repeated Canolles.

"Why, to be sure. The duke, tired of waiting, and failing to see you leave the inn, will go to the house himself."

"Yes; but I will simply go in and out again."

"Once inside, you won't come out."

"There's no doubt about it, young man," said Canolles, "you are a magician."

"You will be surprised, perhaps killed before her eyes; that's all there is about it."

"Pshaw!" said Canolles, "there are closets there."

"Oh!" exclaimed the viscount.

This *oh!* was uttered with such an eloquent intonation, it contained such a world of veiled reproach, of offended modesty, of charming delicacy, that Canolles stopped short, and darted a piercing glance at the young man, who was leaning on the window-sill.

Despite the darkness, he felt the full force of the glance, and continued in a playful tone, —

"Of course, you're quite right, baron; go by all means, but conceal yourself carefully, so that you may not be surprised."

"No, I was wrong," said Canolles, "and you are right. But how can I warn her?"

"It seems to me that a letter – "

"Who will carry it?"

"I thought that I saw a servant following you. A servant, under such circumstances, runs the risk of nothing worse than a few blows, while a gentleman risks his life."

"Verily I am losing my wits," said Canolles; "Castorin will do the errand to perfection, especially as I suspect that the rascal has allies in the house."

"You see that the matter can all be arranged here," said the viscount.

"Yes. Have you writing materials?"

"No; but they have them downstairs."

"Pardon me, I beg you," said Canolles; "upon my word, I can't imagine what has happened to me this evening, for I say one idiotic thing after another. No matter. Thanks for your good advice, viscount, and I shall act upon it immediately."

Without taking his eyes from the young man, whom he had been examining for some moments with strange persistency, Canolles backed to the door and descended the stairs, while the viscount muttered anxiously, —

"How he stares at me! can he have recognized me?"

Canolles meanwhile had gone down to the ground-floor, and having gazed for a moment with profound sorrow at the quail, partridge, and sweetmeats, which Master Biscarros was himself packing in the hamper upon the head of his assistant cook, and which another than he was to eat perhaps, although they were certainly intended for him, he asked to be shown to his room, called for writing materials, and wrote to Nanon the following letter: —

> Dear Madame – About a hundred yards from your door, if nature had endowed your lovely eyes with the power to see in the dark, you could descry in a clump of trees Monsieur le Duc d'Épernon, who is awaiting my coming to have me shot, and compromise you wofully as a consequence. But I am by no means anxious to lose my life or to cause you to lose your peace of mind. Have no fear, therefore, in that direction. For my own part I propose to make use of the leave of absence which you procured for me the other day that I might take advantage of my freedom to come and see you. Where I am going, I have no idea; indeed, I am not sure that I shall go anywhere. However that may be, recall your fugitive adorer when the storm has passed. They will tell you at the Golden Calf in which direction I have gone. You will give me due credit, I trust, for my self-sacrifice. But your interests are dearer to me than my own enjoyment. I say my own enjoyment because I should have enjoyed pommelling Monsieur d'Épernon and his minions under their disguise. Believe me, dear lady, your most devoted and most faithful servant.

Canolles signed this effusion, overflowing with Gascon magniloquence, knowing the effect it would have upon the Gascon Nanon. Then he summoned his servant.

"Come hither, Master Castorin," said he, "and tell me frankly on what terms you are with Mademoiselle Francinette."

"But, monsieur," replied Castorin, wondering much at the question, "I don't know if I ought – "

"Have no fear, master idiot; I have no designs upon her, and you haven't the honor of being my rival. I ask the question simply for information."

"Ah! that's a different matter, monsieur, and I may say that Mademoiselle Francinette has deigned to appreciate my good qualities."

"Then you are on the best of terms with her, aren't you, monsieur puppy? Very good. Take this letter and go around by the fields."

"I know the road, monsieur," said Castorin, with a self-satisfied expression.

"'T is well. Knock at the back door. No doubt you know that door, too?"

"Perfectly well."

"Better and better. Take that road, knock at that door, and hand this letter to Mademoiselle Francinette."

"Then, monsieur," said Castorin, joyfully, "I may – "

"You may start instantly; you have ten minutes to go and come. This letter must be delivered to Mademoiselle Nanon de Lartigues at the earliest possible moment."

"But suppose they don't open the door, monsieur?" queried Castorin, suspecting that something had gone wrong.

"Why, you must be a fool in that case, for you should have some particular way of knocking, which makes it certain that a brave fellow like you won't be left outside; if that's not the case, I am much to be pitied for having such a dolt in my service."

"I have a private knock, monsieur," said Castorin, with his most conquering air; "first I knock twice softly, then a third – "

"I don't ask you how you knock, nor do I care, if the door is opened. Begone! and if you are taken by surprise, eat the paper, or I'll cut off your ears when you return, if it's not already done."

Castorin was off like a flash. But when he reached the foot of the staircase he stopped, and, in defiance of all rules, thrust the letter into the top of his boot; then he left the inn by the barn-yard door, and made a long circuit, sneaking through the bushes like a fox, jumping ditches like a greyhound, until at last he reached the rear door of the little house, and knocked in the peculiar fashion he had tried to explain to his master.

It proved to be so effective that the door opened instantly.

Ten minutes later, Castorin returned to the inn without accident, and informed his master that the letter was in the fair hands of Mademoiselle Nanon.

Canolles had employed these ten minutes in opening his portmanteau, laying out his *robe de chambre*, and ordering his supper to be served. He listened with visible satisfaction to Monsieur Castorin's report, and made a trip to the kitchen, giving his orders for the night in a loud tone, and yawning immoderately, like a man who is impatient for bed-time to arrive. These manœuvres were intended to convince the Duc d'Épernon, if he had put spies upon him, that the baron had never intended to go farther than the inn, where he had stopped for supper and lodging, like the unpretentious, inoffensive traveller he was. And the scheme really produced the result that the baron hoped. A man in the guise of a peasant, who was drinking in the darkest corner of the public room, called the waiter, paid his reckoning, rose, and went out unconcernedly, humming a tune. Canolles followed him to the door, and saw that he went toward the clump of trees; in a few moments he heard the receding steps of several horses, – the ambuscade was raised.

Thereupon the baron, with his mind at rest concerning Nanon, thought only of passing the evening as agreeably as possible; he therefore bade Castorin bring cards and dice, and, having done so, to go and ask the Vicomte de Cambes if he would do him the honor to receive him.

Castorin obeyed, and found at the vicomte's door an old, white-haired squire, who held the door half open, and replied surlily to his complimentary message, —

"Impossible at present; Monsieur le Vicomte is very much engaged."

"Very well," said Canolles, when the answer was reported to him, "I will wait."

As he heard considerable noise in the direction of the kitchen, to pass the time away he went to see what was going on in that important part of the establishment.

The uproar was caused by the return of the poor scullion, more dead than alive. At the bend in the road he was stopped by four men, who questioned him as to the objective point of his nocturnal expedition; and upon learning that he was carrying supper to the lady at the little house among the trees, stripped him of his cap, his white waistcoat and his apron. The youngest of the four then donned the distinctive garb of the victim's profession, balanced the hamper on his head, and kept on toward the little house in the place and stead of the scullion. Not long after, he returned, and talked in a low tone with the man who seemed the leader of the party. Then they restored his vest and cap and apron, replaced the hamper on his head, and gave him a kick in the stern to start him in the direction he was to follow. The poor devil asked for no more definite instructions; he started off at full speed, and fell half-dead with terror at the door of the inn, where he had just been picked up.

This episode was quite unintelligible to everybody except Canolles; and as he had no motive for explaining it, he left host, waiters, chambermaids, cook, and scullion to cudgel their brains over it; while they were outdoing one another in wild conjectures, he went up to the vicomte's door, and, assuming that the first message he had sent him by the mouth of Monsieur Castorin permitted him to dispense with a second formality of the same nature, he opened the door unceremoniously and went in.

A table, lighted and set with two covers, stood in the middle of the room, awaiting, to be complete, only the dishes with which it was to be embellished.

Canolles noticed the two covers, and drew a joyful inference therefrom.

However, the viscount when he saw him standing in the doorway, jumped to his feet so suddenly that it was easy to see that he was greatly surprised by the visit, and that the second cover was not intended for the baron, as he flattered himself for an instant that it was. His doubts were set at rest by the first words the viscount uttered.

"May I be permitted to know, Monsieur le Baron," he asked, walking to meet him ceremoniously, "to what new circumstance I am indebted for the honor of this visit?"

"Why," rejoined Canolles, somewhat taken aback by this ungracious reception, "to a very natural circumstance. I am hungry. I thought that you must be in the same plight. You are alone, I am alone; and I wished to have the honor of suggesting to you that we sup together."

The viscount looked at Canolles with evident distrust, and seemed to feel some embarrassment in answering him.

"Upon my honor!" said Canolles, laughing, "one would say that I frighten you; are you a knight of Malta, pray? Are you destined for the Church, or has your respectable family brought you up in holy horror of the Canolles? *Pardieu!* I shall not ruin you if we pass an hour together on opposite sides of a table."

"Impossible for me to go to your room, baron."

"Very well, don't do it. But as I am already here – "

"Even more impossible, monsieur; I am expecting some one."

This time Canolles was disarmed.

"You are expecting some one?" he said.

"Yes."

"'Faith," said Canolles, after a moment of silence, "I should almost prefer that you had let me go on at any risk, rather than spoil, by your manifest repugnance for my society, the service you rendered me, for which I fear that I have not as yet thanked you sufficiently."

The young man blushed and walked to Canolles' side.

"Forgive me, monsieur," he said in a trembling voice; "I realize how rude I am; and if it were not serious business, family matters, which I have to discuss with the person I expect, it would be both an honor and a pleasure to admit you as a third, although – "

"Oh, finish!" said Canolles; "whatever you say, I am determined not to be angry with you."

"Although," continued the viscount, "our acquaintance is one of the unforeseen results of mere chance, one of those fortuitous meetings, one of those momentary relations – "

"Why so?" queried Canolles. "On the contrary, the most sincere and enduring friendships are formed in this way: we simply have to give credit to Providence for what you attribute to chance."

"Providence, monsieur," the viscount rejoined with a laugh, "decrees that I depart two hours hence, and that, in all probability, I take the opposite direction to that you will take; receive, therefore, my sincere regrets at my inability to accept, gladly as I would do so if I could, the friendship you offer me so cordially, and of which I fully appreciate the worth."

"You are a strange fellow, upon my word," said Canolles, "and the generous impulse upon which you acted in the first place gave me quite a different idea of your character. But of course it shall be as you desire; I certainly have no right to persist, for I am your debtor, and you have done much more for me than I had any right to expect from a stranger. I will return, therefore, to my own room, and sup alone; but I assure you, viscount, it goes against my grain. I am not addicted to monologue."

Indeed, notwithstanding what he said, and his declared purpose to withdraw, Canolles did not withdraw; some power that he could not understand seemed to nail him to his place; he felt irresistibly drawn to the viscount, who, however, took up a candle and approached him with a charming smile.

"Monsieur," said he, extending his hand, "however that may be, and short as our acquaintance has been, I beg you to believe that I am overjoyed to have been of service to you."

Canolles heard nothing but the compliment; he seized the hand the viscount offered him, which was warm and soft, and, instead of answering his friendly, masculine pressure, was withdrawn at once. Realizing that his dismissal was none the less a dismissal, although couched in courteous phrase, he left the room, disappointed and thoughtful.

At the door he encountered the toothless smile of the old valet, who took the candle from the viscount's hands, ceremoniously escorted Canolles to his door, and hastened back to his master, who was waiting at the top of the stairs.

"What is he doing?" the viscount asked in an undertone.

"I think he has made up his mind to take supper alone," replied Pompée.

"Then he won't come up again?"

"I hope not, at least."

"Order the horses, Pompée; it will be so much time gained. But what is that noise?"

"I should say it was Monsieur Richon's voice."

"And Monsieur de Canolles?"

"They seem to be quarrelling."

"On the contrary, they are greeting each other. Listen!"

"If only Richon does n't say anything."

"Oh! there's no fear of that; he's very circumspect."

"Hush!"

As they ceased to speak, they heard Canolles' voice.

"Two covers, Master Biscarros," he cried. "Two covers! Monsieur Richon sups with me."

"By your leave, no," replied Richon; "it's impossible."

"The deuce! so you too propose to sup alone, like the young gentleman upstairs?"

"What gentleman?"

"The one upstairs, I say."

"What's his name?"

"Vicomte de Cambes."

"Oho! you know the viscount, do you?"

"*Pardieu!* he saved my life."

"He?"

"Yes, he."

"How was that?"

"Sup with me, and I'll tell you the whole story during supper."

"I cannot; I am to sup with him."

"Ah! yes; he is awaiting some one."

"Myself; and as I am late, you will allow me to leave you, will you not, baron?"

"*Sacrebleu!* no, I will not allow it!" cried Canolles. "I have taken it into my head that I will sup in company, and you will sup with me or I with you. Master Biscarros, two covers!"

But while Canolles turned his back to see if the order was executed, Richon darted rapidly up the staircase. When he reached the top stair a little hand met his and drew him into the viscount's room, the door of which immediately closed behind him, and was locked and bolted for greater security.

"In very truth," muttered Canolles, looking about in vain for Richon, and seating himself at his solitary table, "in very truth, I don't know what the people of this cursed country have against me; some of them run after me to kill me, and others avoid me as if I had the plague. *Corbleu!* my appetite is vanishing; I feel that I am growing melancholy, and I am capable of getting as drunk as a lansquenet to-night. Holé! Castorin, come here and be thrashed. Why, they are locking themselves in up there as if they were conspiring. Double calf that I am! of course they are conspiring; that's just it, and it explains everything. The next question is, in whose interest are they conspiring? – the coadjutor's? the princes'? the parliament's? the king's? the queen's? Monsieur de Mazarin's? 'Faith, they may conspire against any one they choose, it's all the same to me; and my appetite has returned. Castorin, order up my supper, and give me some wine; I forgive you."

Thereupon Canolles philosophically attacked the first supper that was prepared for the Vicomte de Cambes, which Master Biscarros was compelled to serve up to him, warmed over, for lack of supplies.

IV

Let us now see what was taking place under Nanon's roof while Baron de Canolles was vainly seeking some one to sup with him, until, growing weary of the profitless quest, he decided at last to sup by himself.

Nanon, whatever her enemies may have said or written – and among her enemies must be accounted the great majority of the historians who have devoted any space to her – was, at this period, a charming creature of some twenty-five or twenty-six years; small of stature, dark-skinned, but with a supple, graceful figure, bright, fresh coloring, eyes of deepest black, in whose limpid depths all the passions and emotions found expression: gay on the surface, in appearance a laughing siren. But Nanon was very far from giving her mind to the whims and follies which embroider with fantastic designs the silky and golden woof of which the life of a *petite-maîtresse* ordinarily consists. On the contrary, the most weighty conclusions, long and laboriously reasoned out in her shapely head, assumed an aspect no less seductive than clear when enounced by her vibrating voice, in which the Gascon accent was very marked. No one would have divined the untiring perseverance, the invincible tenacity, and the statesmanlike depth of insight which lay beneath that rosy, smiling mask, behind that look overflowing with voluptuous promise, and glowing with passion. And yet such were Nanon's qualities, good or bad according as we look at the face or the reverse of the medal. Such was the scheming mind, such the ambitious heart, to which her seductive body served as envelope.

Nanon was of Agen. Monsieur le Duc d'Épernon, son of that inseparable friend of Henri IV. who was in his carriage when Ravaillac's knife struck him, and was the object of suspicions which did not stop short of Marie de Médicis – Monsieur le Duc d'Épernon, appointed governor of Guyenne, where his arrogance, his insolence, and his exactions caused him to be generally execrated, was captivated by the little creature, who was the daughter of a simple attorney. He paid court to her, and conquered her scruples with great difficulty, and after a long defence maintained with the skill of a consummate tactician determined that the victor shall pay the full price of his victory.

But, as the ransom of her thenceforth ruined reputation, Nanon had despoiled the duke of his power and his freedom. At the end of the first six months of her liaison with the governor of Guyenne, she was the *de facto* ruler of that fair province, returning with interest the injuries and insults she had received from all those who had slighted or humiliated her. A queen by chance, she became a tyrant by design, shrewdly realizing the advisability of supplementing the probable brevity of her reign by abusing her power.

As a consequence, she seized upon everything she could reach, – treasure, influence, honors. She was enormously wealthy, distributed appointments, received visits from Mazarin and the leading noblemen at court. With admirable skill she made of the various elements that she had at her disposal a combination useful to her credit, and profitable to her fortune. Every service that Nanon rendered had its stated price. There was a regularly established tariff for appointments in the army and in the magistracy: Nanon would procure this position or that for some fortunate individual, but it must be paid for in hard cash or by a royal gift; so that when she relaxed her hold upon a fragment of power for the benefit of one person or another, she recouped the fragment in another form, giving up the authority, but retaining the money, which is its active principle.

This explains the duration of her reign; for men, in their hatred, hesitate to overthrow an enemy who will have any consolation remaining in his downfall. Vengeance thirsts for total ruin, for complete prostration. Nations are reluctant to expel a tyrant who would carry away their money, and depart with smiling face. Nanon de Lartigues had two millions.

And so she lived in a species of security over the volcano which was unceasingly shaking everything about her to its foundations. She had felt the popular hatred rise like the tide, increase in force, and assail with its waves the power of Monsieur d'Épernon, who, when hunted from Bordeaux

in a day of wrath, had carried Nanon in his wake, as the ship carries the skiff. Nanon bent before the storm, ready to stand erect again when it should have passed; she had taken Monsieur de Mazarin for her model, and, an humble pupil, she practised at a distance the political tactics of the clever and pliable Italian. The cardinal's notice was attracted by this woman, who waxed great and wealthy by the same method which had made him a prime minister, possessed of fifty millions. He admired the little Gasconne; he did more than that, – he let her do as she chose. Perhaps we shall eventually know why.

Notwithstanding all this, and although some who claimed to be better informed averred that she corresponded directly with Monsieur de Mazarin, but little was said of the fair Nanon's political intrigues. Canolles himself, who, however, being young and rich and handsome, could not understand the need of intriguing, did not know what to think upon that point. As to love-affairs, whether it was that Nanon, in her preoccupation by more serious matters, had postponed them to a more convenient season, or that the gossip caused by Monsieur d'Épernon's passion drowned whatever noise any secondary amours might have made, even her enemies were not lavish of scandalous reports in her regard, and Canolles was justified in believing, as a matter of personal and national self-esteem, that Nanon was invincible before his appearance upon the scene. It may be that Canolles was, in truth, the beneficiary of the first real passion of that heart, hitherto accessible to ambition only; it may be that prudence had enjoined upon his predecessors absolute silence. At all events, Nanon, as mistress, was a fascinating woman; Nanon, insulted, was like to be a redoubtable foe.

The acquaintance between Nanon and Canolles had come about in the most natural way. Canolles, a lieutenant in the Navailles regiment, aspired to the rank of captain; in order to obtain the promotion, he was obliged to write to Monsieur d'Épernon, colonel-general of infantry. Nanon read the letter, and replied in the ordinary way, making a business appointment with Canolles. He selected from among his family jewels a magnificent ring, worth some five hundred pistoles (it was less expensive than to purchase a company), and betook himself to the place appointed for the meeting. But on this occasion Canolles, preceded by the renown of his previous triumphs, upset all Mademoiselle de Lartigues' calculations. It was the first time that he had seen Nanon; it was the first time that Nanon had seen him; they were both young, handsome, and clever. Their conversation consisted chiefly of reciprocal compliments; not a word was said concerning the business which brought them together, and yet the business was done. The next day Canolles received his captain's commission, and when the ring passed from his finger to Nanon's it was not as the price of gratified ambition, but as a pledge of mutual love.

V

A few words will suffice to explain Nanon's residence near the village of Matifou. As we have said, the Duc d'Épernon was intensely hated in Guyenne. Nanon, who had been honored by being transformed into his evil genius, was execrated. The popular outcry drove them from Bordeaux to Agen. But at Agen it began anew. One day the gilded carriage in which Nanon was driving to join the duke was overturned upon a bridge. By some unexplained means, Nanon found herself in the river, and Canolles pulled her out. One night Nanon's residence in the city took fire, and Canolles it was who made his way to her bedroom and saved her from the flames. Nanon concluded that the Agenois might probably succeed at the third trial. Although Canolles left her side as little as possible, it would be a miracle if he should always happen to be on hand at a given point to rescue her. She availed herself of the duke's absence on a tour through the province, and of an escort of twelve hundred men, of whom the Navailles regiment furnished its quota, to leave the city at the same time with Canolles, hurling defiance from her carriage windows at the populace, who would have liked nothing so much as to wreck the carriage, but dared not.

Thereafter the duke and Nanon selected, or rather Canolles had secretly selected for them, the little country-house where it was decided that Nanon should remain while an establishment was being prepared for her at Libourne. Canolles procured a leave of absence, ostensibly in order to attend to some private business at his home, really so that he might be at liberty to leave his regiment, which had returned to Agen, and to remain within a reasonable distance of Matifou, where his protecting presence was more necessary than ever.

In fact, events were becoming alarmingly serious. The princes of Condé, Conti, and Longueville, who had been arrested and imprisoned at Vincennes on the 17th January preceding, afforded an excellent pretext for civil war to the four or five factions which divided France at that epoch. The unpopularity of the Duc d'Épernon, who was known to be entirely devoted to the court, continued to increase, although it was reasonable to hope that it had reached its limit. A catastrophe, earnestly desired by all the factions, who, under the extraordinary conditions prevailing in France at the time, did not themselves know where they stood, was imminent. Nanon, like the birds which see the storm approaching, disappeared from the sky and betook herself to her leafy nest, there to await the result unknown and in obscurity.

She gave herself out as a widow, desirous of living in seclusion. So Master Biscarros described her, the reader will remember.

Monsieur d'Épernon paid her a visit, and announced his intention of being absent for a week. As soon as he took his leave of her, Nanon sent by the tax-collector, her *protégé*, a little note to Canolles, who was making use of his leave of absence to remain in the neighborhood. But, as we have seen, the original note had disappeared in the messenger's hands, and had become a copy under Cauvignac's pen. The reckless young nobleman was making all haste to obey the summons contained therein, when the Vicomte de Cambes stopped him four hundred yards from his destination. We know the rest.

Nanon therefore was awaiting Canolles, as a woman who loves is wont to await the loved one, consulting her watch ten times a minute, walking to the window again and again, listening to every sound, gazing questioningly at the sun as it sank in ruddy splendor behind the mountain, to give place to the first shades of night. The first knocking was at the front door, and she despatched Francinette thither; but it was only the pseudo-waiter from the inn, bringing the supper for which the guest was lacking. Nanon looked out into the hall and saw Master Biscarros' false servant, who, for his part, stole a glance into the bedroom, where a tiny table was set with two covers. Nanon bade Francinette keep the dishes hot, then sadly closed the door and returned to the window, which showed her the road still deserted as far as she could see it in the gathering darkness.

A second knock, a peculiar knock, was heard, this time at the back door, and Nanon cried, —

"Here he is!"

But still she feared that it was not he, and stopped in the middle of the room. The next moment the door opened, and Mademoiselle Francinette appeared on the threshold in evident consternation, holding the letter in her hand. Nanon spied the paper, rushed up to her, tore it from her hand, hastily opened it, and read it in an agony of fear.

The perusal of the letter was like a thunder-clap to Nanon. She dearly loved Canolles, but with her, ambition was almost equal to love, and in losing the Duc d'Épernon she would lose not only all her hopes of fortune to come, but perhaps her accumulated wealth as well. However, as she was a quick-witted siren, she began by putting out the candle, which would have caused her shadow to betray her movements, and ran to the window. It was time; four men were approaching the house, and were not more than fifty feet away. The man in the cloak walked first, and in the man in the cloak Nanon recognized the duke beyond a peradventure. At that moment Mademoiselle Francinette entered, candle in hand. Nanon glanced despairingly at the table and the two covers, at the two arm-chairs, at the two embroidered pillows, which displayed their insolent whiteness against the background of crimson damask bed-curtains, and at her fascinating *négligé*, which harmonized so well with all the rest.

"I am lost!" she thought.

But almost immediately her wits returned to her, and a smile stole over her face; like a flash she seized the plain glass tumbler intended for Canolles, and threw it out into the garden, took from its box a golden goblet adorned with the duke's arms, and placed beside his plate his silver cover; then, shivering with fear, but with a forced smile upon her face, she rushed down the stairs, and reached the door just as a grave, solemn blow was struck upon it.

Francinette was about to open the door, but Nanon caught her by the arm, thrust her aside, and said, with that swift glance which, with women taken by surprise, serves so well to complete their thought, —

"I am waiting for Monsieur le Duc, not for Monsieur de Canolles. Serve the supper!"

With that she drew the bolts herself, and threw herself upon the neck of the man with the white plume, who was preparing to greet her with a most savage expression.

"Ah!" she cried, "my dream did not play me false! Come, my dear duke, everything is ready, and we will go to supper at once."

D'Épernon was dumfounded; however, as a caress from a pretty woman is always acceptable, he allowed himself to be kissed.

But the next moment he remembered what overwhelming proof he possessed.

"One moment, mademoiselle," he said; "let us have an understanding, if you please."

With a wave of his hand to his followers, who drew back respectfully but did not go away altogether, the duke entered the house alone, with slow and measured step.

"Pray, what's the matter, my dear duke?" said Nanon, with such well-feigned gayety that any one might have thought it natural; "did you forget something the last time you were here, that you look around so carefully on all sides?"

"Yes," said the duke; "I forgot to tell you that I am not a consummate ass, a Géronte, such as Monsieur Cyrano de Bergerac introduces in his comedies, and having forgotten to tell it you, I have returned in person to prove it to you."

"I do not understand you, monseigneur," said Nanon, with the most tranquil and sincere expression imaginable. "Explain yourself, I beg."

The duke's eyes rested on the two arm-chairs, and passed thence to the two covers and the two pillows. There they paused for a longer time, while an angry flush overspread his face.

Nanon had foreseen all this, and she awaited the result of his scrutiny with a smile which disclosed her pearly teeth. But the smile strongly resembled a contraction of the nerves, and her teeth would have chattered if anguish had not kept them pressed tightly together.

The duke at last fixed his wrathful gaze upon her.

"I am still awaiting your Lordship's pleasure," said Nanon, with a graceful courtesy.

"My Lordship's pleasure is that you explain this supper."

"I have already told you that I dreamed that you would return to-day although you left me only yesterday. My dreams never fail to come true, so I ordered this supper purposely for you."

The duke made a grimace which he intended to pass off for an ironical smile.

"And the two pillows?" he said.

"Pray, is it monseigneur's intention to return to Libourne? In that case, my dream lied to me, for it told me that monseigneur would remain."

The duke made a second grimace even more significant than the first.

"And this charming *négligé*, madame? And these exquisite perfumes?"

"It is one of those I am accustomed to wear when I expect monseigneur. The perfume comes from sachets of *peau d'Espagne*, which I put in my wardrobes, and which monseigneur has often told me he preferred to all others, because it is the queen's favorite perfume."

"And so you were expecting me?" rejoined the duke, with a sneering laugh.

"Good lack, monseigneur," said Nanon, frowning; "I believe, God forgive me, that you would like to look in the closets. Are you jealous by any chance?"

Nanon laughed aloud, whereat the duke assumed his most majestic air.

"I, jealous? No, no! Thank God, I'm no such idiot as that. Being old and rich, I know naturally that I was made to be deceived, but I propose to prove to those who deceive me that I am not their dupe."

"How will you prove it, pray? I am curious to know."

"Oh! it will be an easy matter. I shall simply have to show them this paper."

He took a letter from his pocket.

"I don't dream, myself," he said; "at my age one doesn't dream, even when awake; but I receive letters. Read this one; it's very interesting."

Nanon shuddered as she took the letter the duke handed her, and started when she saw the writing; but the movement was imperceptible, and she read, —

"'Monseigneur le Duc d'Épernon is informed that a man who, for six months past, has been on familiar terms with Mademoiselle Nanon de Lartigues, will visit her this evening, and will remain to supper and to sleep.

"'As I do not desire to leave Monseigneur le Duc d'Épernon in uncertainty, he is informed that his fortunate rival is Monsieur le Baron de Canolles.'"

Nanon turned pale; the blow struck home.

"Ah! Roland! Roland!" she murmured, "I believed myself to be well rid of you."

"Am I well informed?" queried the duke, triumphantly.

"Not by any means," retorted Nanon; "and if your political police is no better organized than your amorous police, I pity you."

"You pity me?"

"Yes; for this Monsieur de Canolles, whom you gratuitously honor by believing him to be your rival, is not here, and you are at liberty to wait and see if he comes."

"He has come."

"He?" cried Nanon. "That is not true!"

There was an unmistakable accent of truth in this exclamation of the accused.

"I mean that he came within four hundred yards, and stopped at the Golden Calf, luckily for him."

Nanon saw that the duke was not nearly so well informed as she had supposed at first; she shrugged her shoulders as another idea, prompted doubtless by the letter, which she was folding and unfolding in her hands, began to take root in her mind.

"Is it possible," said she, "that a man of intellect, one of the cleverest politicians in the kingdom, allows himself to be gulled by anonymous letters?"

"That's all very well; but how do you explain this letter, anonymous or not?"

"Why, the explanation's very simple; it's simply a continuation of the generous proceedings of our friends at Agen. Monsieur de Canolles applied to you for leave of absence on account of urgent private business, and you granted it; they found out that he had come in this direction, and this absurd accusation has no other foundation than his journey."

Nanon noticed that the duke's features did not relax, but that his scowl became more pronounced.

"The explanation would answer, if the letter you attribute to your friends had not a certain postscript, which, in your confusion, you omitted to read."

The young woman shivered with terror; she realized that, if chance did not come to her assistance, she could not long continue the struggle.

"A postscript?" she repeated.

"Yes; read it," said the duke; "you have the letter in your hands."

Nanon tried to smile; but she felt that her distorted features would not lend their aid to any such demonstration; she contented herself, therefore, with reading aloud, in the firmest tones she could command, —

> "'I have in my possession Mademoiselle de Lartigues' letter to Monsieur de Canolles, making the appointment I mention for this evening. I will give up the letter in exchange for a paper signed in blank by Monsieur d'Épernon, to be handed to me by a man, alone in a boat on the Dordogne, opposite the village of Saint-Michel-la-Rivière, at six o'clock in the evening.'"

"And you were so imprudent – " continued Nanon.

"Your handwriting is so precious to me, dear lady, that I thought I could not pay too high a price for a letter of yours."

"And you revealed such a secret to the possible indiscretion of one of your servants! Oh! Monsieur le Duc!"

"Such confidences, madame, a man should receive in person, and I so received this one. I, myself, was waiting in the boat on the Dordogne."

"Then you have my letter?"

"Here it is."

Nanon made a superhuman effort to remember the exact contents of the letter, but it was impossible; her brain was beginning to be confused. She had no alternative, therefore, but to take her own letter and read it. It contained barely three lines; Nanon ran her eye over them in eager haste, and saw, with unspeakable delight, that the letter did not compromise her beyond all hope.

"Read it aloud," said the duke; "like you, I have forgotten what the letter contains."

Nanon found the smile she had sought in vain a few seconds before, and complied with the duke's suggestion.

> "'I shall take supper at eight o'clock. Are you free? I am. If so, be punctual, my dear Canolles, and have no fear for our secret.'"

"I should say that that is explicit enough," cried the duke, pale with rage.

"That is my salvation," thought Nanon.

"So you have a secret with Monsieur de Canolles, have you?" continued the duke.

VI

Nanon realized that to hesitate for a second would be her destruction. Moreover, she had had time enough to develop in her brain the scheme suggested by the anonymous letter.

"Yes," said she, gazing fixedly at the duke, "I have a secret with that gentleman."

"You confess it?" cried Monsieur d'Épernon.

"I must; for one can conceal nothing from you."

"Oh!" shouted the duke.

"Yes, I was expecting Monsieur de Canolles," continued Nanon, calmly.

"You were expecting him?"

"I was expecting him."

"You dare admit it?"

"Freely. Tell me, now, do you know who Monsieur de Canolles is?"

"He is a jackanapes, whom I will punish cruelly for his impudence."

"He is a noble and gallant gentleman, to whom you will continue your benefactions."

"Oh! I swear by the Almighty that I will not!"

"No oaths, Monsieur le Duc; at all events, not until I have said what I have to say," rejoined Nanon, smiling sweetly.

"Say on, then, but waste no time."

"Haven't you, who are so skilful in probing the human heart to its lowest depths," said Nanon, "haven't you remarked my partiality for Monsieur de Canolles, my repeated solicitations in his interest? – the captain's commission I procured for him, the grant of money for a trip to Bretagne with Monsieur de Meilleraie, his recent leave of absence, – in a word, my constant efforts to gratify him?"

"Madame, madame!" said the duke, "you exceed all bounds!"

"For God's sake, Monsieur le Duc, wait until you hear the end!"

"Why should I wait any longer? What more is there for you to tell me?"

"That I have a most affectionate interest in Monsieur de Canolles."

"*Pardieu!* I know it well."

"That I am devoted to him, body and soul."

"Madame, you abuse – "

"That I will do my utmost to oblige him while I live, and all because – "

"Because he's your lover; that's not difficult to guess."

"Because," continued Nanon, seizing the wrathful duke's arm with a dramatic gesture, "because he is my brother!"

Monsieur d'Épernon's arm fell to his side.

"Your brother?" he said.

Nanon nodded affirmatively with a triumphant smile.

"This calls for an explanation," the duke cried, after a moment's reflection.

"Which I will give you," said Nanon. "When did my father die?"

"Why, about eight months since," replied the duke, after a short mental calculation.

"When did you sign the captain's commission for Canolles?"

"Eh? at about the same time."

"A fortnight later," said Nanon.

"A fortnight later; it's very possible."

"It is a sad thing for me to disclose another woman's shame, to divulge a secret which belongs to us alone, you understand. But your extraordinary jealousy drives me to it, your cruelty leaves me no alternative. I am like you, Monsieur le Duc, I lack generosity."

"Go on, go on!" cried the duke, beginning to yield to the fair Gasconne's imaginative flights.

"Very good; my father was an attorney of some note. Twenty-eight years ago he was still young, and he was always fine-looking. Before his marriage he was in love with Monsieur de Canolles' mother, whose hand was denied him because she was of noble blood, and he a plebeian. Love undertook the task of remedying the mistakes of nature, as it often does; and during Monsieur de Canolles, the elder's, absence from home – Now do you understand?"

"Yes; but how does it happen that this affection for Monsieur de Canolles took possession of you so recently?"

"Because I never knew of the bond between us until my father's death; because the secret was made known to me in a letter handed me by the baron himself, who then addressed me as his sister."

"Where is that letter?" queried the duke.

"Have you forgotten the fire which consumed everything I owned, – all my most valuable jewels and papers?"

"True," said the duke.

"Twenty times I have been on the point of telling you the story, feeling sure that you would do everything for him whom I call my brother under my breath; but he has always prevented me, always begged me to spare his mother's reputation, for she is still living. I have respected his scruples because I appreciated them."

"Ah! indeed!" said the duke, almost melted; "poor Canolles!"

"And yet," continued Nanon, "when he refused to let me speak, he threw away his own fortune."

"He's a high-minded youth," said the duke, "and his scruples do him honor."

"I did more than respect his scruples, – I swore that the mystery should never be revealed to any one on earth; but your suspicions caused the cup to overflow. Woe is me! I have forgotten my oath! Woe is me! I have betrayed my brother's secret!"

And Nanon burst into tears.

The duke fell upon his knees and kissed her pretty hands, which hung dejectedly at her side, while her eyes were raised toward heaven, as if imploring God's forgiveness for her perjury.

"You say, 'Woe is me!'" cried the duke; "say rather, 'Good luck for all!' I propose that poor Canolles shall make up for lost time. I don't know him, but I desire to know him. You shall present him to me, and I will love him like a son!"

"Say like a brother," rejoined Nanon, with a smile.

"Villanous informers!" she suddenly cried, passing to another train of thought, and crumpling the letter in her hand as if she proposed to throw it in the fire, but carefully placing it in her pocket, with a view of confronting its author with it later.

"Now that I think of it," said the duke, "why shouldn't the rascal come here? Why should I wait any longer before seeing him? I'll send at once to the Golden Calf to bid him come."

"Oh, of course," said Nanon, "so that he may know that I can conceal nothing from you, and that I have told you everything in utter disregard of my oath."

"I will be careful."

"Ah! Monsieur le Duc, do you wish me to quarrel with you?" retorted Nanon, with one of those smiles which demons borrow from angels.

"How so, my dear love?"

"Because you used to be more anxious for a *tête-à-tête* than now. Let us sup together, and to-morrow it will be time enough to send for Canolles. Between now and to-morrow," said Nanon to herself, "I shall have time to warn him."

"So be it," said the duke; "let us sup."

Haunted by a vestige of suspicion, he added, under his breath, —

"Between now and to-morrow I will not leave her side, and if she succeeds in inventing any method of warning him, she's a sorceress."

"And so," said Nanon, laying her hand upon the duke's shoulder, "I may venture to solicit my friend in my brother's interest?"

"Most assuredly!" rejoined d'Épernon; "as much as you choose. Is it money?"

"Money, indeed!" said Nanon. "He's in no need of money; indeed it was he who gave me the magnificent ring you have noticed, which was his mother's."

"Promotion, then?" said the duke.

"Ah! yes, promotion. We'll make him a colonel, won't we?"

"*Peste!*/ how fast you go, my love! Colonel! To obtain that rank, he must have rendered his Majesty's cause some service."

"He is ready to render that cause whatever service may be pointed out to him."

"Indeed!" said the duke, looking at Nanon out of the corner of his eye, "I shall have occasion to send some one on a confidential mission to the court."

"To the court!" exclaimed Nanon.

"Yes," replied the old courtier; "but that would separate you."

Nanon saw that she must take some means to destroy this remnant of suspicion.

"Oh! don't be alarmed about that, my dear duke. What matters the separation, so long as there is profit in it? If he's near at hand, I can be of but little use to him – you are jealous; but, at a distance, you will extend your powerful patronage to him. Exile him, ex-patriate him if it's for his good, and don't be concerned about me. So long as I retain my dear duke's affection, have I not more than enough to make me happy?"

"Very well, it's agreed," said the duke; "to-morrow morning I will send for him, and give him his instructions. And now, as you suggest," he continued, casting a much more amiable glance upon the two chairs, the two covers, and the two pillows; "and now, my love, let us sup."

They took their places at the table, smiling amicably at each other; so that Francinette herself, although, in her capacity of confidential maid, she was well used to the duke's peculiarities and her mistress's character, believed that her mistress was perfectly tranquil in her mind, and the duke completely reassured.

VII

The gentleman whom Canolles greeted by the name of Richon, went up to the first floor of the Golden Calf, and was taking supper there with the viscount.

He was the person whose coming the viscount was impatiently awaiting when chance made him a witness of Monsieur d'Épernon's hostile preparations, and made it possible for him to render Baron de Canolles the important service we have described.

He had left Paris a week before, and Bordeaux the same day, and was therefore the bearer of recent news concerning the somewhat disturbed state of affairs, and the disquieting plots which were brewing all the way from Paris to Bordeaux. As he spoke, now of the imprisonment of the princes, which was the sensation of the day, again of the Parliament of Bordeaux, which was the ruling power of the neighborhood, and still again of Monsieur de Mazarin, who was the king of the moment, the young man silently watched his strong, bronzed face, his piercing, confident eye, his sharp, white teeth, which showed beneath his long, black moustache, – details which made Richon the perfect type of the true soldier of fortune.

"And so," said the viscount, after his companion had told what he had to tell, "Madame la Princesse is now at Chantilly?"

As is well known, both Duchesses de Condé were so called, but the additional title of Dowager was bestowed upon the elder of the two.

"Yes, and they look for you there at the earliest possible moment," said Richon.

"What is her situation?"

"She is practically in exile; her movements as well as her mother-in-law's are watched with the utmost care, for there is a shrewd suspicion at court that they do not mean to confine themselves to petitions to parliament, and that they are concocting something for the benefit of the princes more likely to prove efficacious. Unfortunately, as always, money – Speaking of money, have you received what was due you? That is a question I was strongly urged to ask you."

"I have succeeded with great difficulty in collecting about twenty thousand livres, and I have it with me in gold; that's all."

"All! *Peste!* viscount, it's easy to see that you are a millionnaire. To talk so contemptuously of such a sum at such a time! Twenty thousand francs! We shall be poorer than Monsieur de Mazarin, but richer than the king."

"Then you think that Madame la Princesse will accept my humble offering, Richon?"

"Most gratefully; it is enough to pay an army."

"Do you think that we shall need it?"

"Need what? an army? Most assuredly; and we are busily at work levying one. Monsieur de La Rochefoucauld has enlisted four hundred gentlemen on the pretext that he wishes them to be present at the obsequies of his father. Monsieur le Duc de Bouillon is about starting for Guyenne with an equal number. Monsieur de Turenne promises to make a descent upon Paris in the hope of surprising Vincennes, and carrying off the princes by a *coup de main*; he will have thirty thousand men, – his whole army of the North, whom he has seduced from the king's service. Oh! everything is going along well," Richon continued, "never fear; I don't know if we shall perform any great deeds, but at all events we shall make a great noise."

"Did you not fall in with the Duc d'Épernon?" interposed the young man, whose eyes sparkled with joy at this enumeration of forces, which augured well for the triumph of the party to which he was attached.

"The Duc d'Épernon?" repeated Richon, opening his eyes; "where do you suppose I fell in with him, I pray to know? I come from Agen, not from Bordeaux."

"You might have fallen in with him within a few steps of this place," replied the viscount, smiling.

"Ah! yes, of course, the lovely Nanon de Lartigues lives in the neighborhood, does she not?"

"Within two musket-shots of the inn."

"The deuce! that explains the Baron de Canolles' presence at the Golden Calf."

"Do you know him?"

"Whom? the baron? Yes. I might almost say that I am his friend, if Monsieur de Canolles were not of the oldest nobility, while I am only a poor *roturier*."

"*Roturiers* like yourself, Richon, are quite as valuable as princes in our present plight. Do you know, by the way, that I saved your friend, Baron de Canolles, from a thrashing, if not from something much worse."

"Yes; he said something of that to me, but I hardly listened to him, I was in such haste to join you. Are you sure that he didn't recognize you?"

"He could hardly recognize a person he had never seen."

"I should have asked if he did not guess who you are."

"Indeed," replied the viscount, "he looked at me very hard."

Richon smiled.

"I can well believe it," he said; "one doesn't meet young gentlemen of your type every day."

"He seemed to me a jovial sort of fellow," said the viscount, after a brief pause.

"A jovial fellow and a good fellow, too; he has a charming wit and a great heart. The Gascon, you know, is never mediocre in anything; he is in the front rank or is good for nothing. This one is made of good stuff. In love, as in war, he is at once a dandy and a gallant officer; I am sorry that he is against us. Indeed, as chance brought you in contact with him, you should have seized the opportunity to win him over to our side."

A fugitive blush passed like a flash over the viscount's pale cheeks.

"*Mon Dieu!*" continued Richon, with that melancholy philosophy which is sometimes found in men of the most vigorous temper, "are we so sober-minded and reasonable, pray, that we manage the torch of civil war in our adventurous hands as if it were an altar light? Is Monsieur le Coadjuteur, who, with a word, tranquillizes or arouses Paris, a very serious-minded man? Is Monsieur de Beaufort, whose influence in the capital is so great that he is called '*le roi des halles*' (King of the Markets), a very serious-minded man? Is Madame de Chevreuse, who makes and unmakes ministers at pleasure, a very serious-minded woman? or Madame de Longueville, who nevertheless sat on the throne at the Hôtel de Ville for three months? or Madame la Princesse de Condé, who, no longer ago than yesterday, was engrossed with dresses and jewels and diamonds? Lastly, is Monsieur le Duc d'Enghien, who is still playing with his jumping-jacks, in charge of women, and who will don his first breeches, perhaps, to turn all France topsy-turvy – is he a very serious-minded leader of a party? And myself, if you will allow me to mention my own name after so many illustrious ones, am I a very serious personage, – I, the son of a miller of Angoulème, and once a retainer of Monsieur de La Rochefoucauld, – I, to whom my master one day, instead of a cloak to brush, gave a sword, which I gallantly buckled on at my side, an embryo warrior? And yet the son of the miller of Angoulème, Monsieur de La Rochefoucauld's former *valet-de-chambre*, has risen to be a captain; he is levying a company, bringing together four or five hundred men, with whose lives he is about to play, as if God himself had given him the right; he is marching along on the road to greatness, some day to be colonel, or governor of a fortress – who knows? it may perhaps be his lot to hold for ten minutes, an hour, or a day, the destiny of a kingdom in his hands. This much resembles a dream, as you see, and yet I shall consider it a reality until the day when some great disaster awakens me – "

"And on that day," the viscount broke in, "woe to those who awaken you, Richon; for you will be a hero."

"A hero or a traitor, according as we are the strongest or the weakest. Under the other cardinal I should have looked twice, for I should have risked my head."

"Go to, Richon; do not try to make me believe that such considerations can influence a man like you, who are pointed to as one of the bravest soldiers in the whole army!"

"Oh! of course," said Richon, with an indescribable motion of his shoulders, "I was brave when King Louis XIII., with his pale face, his blue ribbon, and his eye gleaming like a carbuncle, cried in his strident voice, biting the ends of his moustache, 'The king is looking at you; forward, messieurs!' But when I am obliged to look at the same blue ribbon on the son's breast, which I can still see on the father's, and no longer behind me, but before my face; when I am obliged to shout to my soldiers, 'Fire on the King of France!' – on that day," continued Richon, shaking his head, "on that day, viscount, I fear that I shall be afraid, and aim badly – "

"What snake have you trodden on to-day, that you persist in putting things in the worst light, my dear Richon?" the young man asked. "Civil war is a deplorable thing, I know, but sometimes necessary."

"Yes, like the plague, the yellow fever, the black fever, fever of all colors. Do you think, for instance, Monsieur le Vicomte, that it is absolutely necessary that I, who have been so glad to grasp my good friend Canolles' hand this evening, should run my sword through his body to-morrow, because I serve Madame la Princesse de Condé, who laughs at me, and he Monsieur de Mazarin, at whom he laughs? Yet it may fall out so."

The viscount made a horrified gesture.

"Unless," pursued Richon, "I am out in my reckoning, and he makes a hole in me in one way or another. Ah! you people have no appreciation of what war is; you see nothing but a sea of intrigue, and plunge into it as if it were your natural element; as I said the other day to her Highness, and she agreed with me, 'You live in a sphere wherein the artillery fire which mows you down seems to you simple fireworks.'"

"In sooth, Richon, you frighten me," said the viscount, "and if I were not sure of having you at hand to protect me, I should not dare to start; but under your escort," he continued, holding out his little hand to the partisan, "I have no fear."

"My escort?" said Richon. "Oh, yes, you remind me of something I had forgotten; you will have to do without my escort, Monsieur le Vicomte; that arrangement has fallen through."

"Why, are you not to return to Chantilly with me?"

"I was to do so, in the event that my presence was not necessary here; but, as I was saying, my importance has increased to such a point that I received a positive command from Madame la Princesse not to leave the vicinity of the fort, upon which there are designs, it seems."

The viscount uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"What! I am to go without you?" he cried; "to go with no one but honest Pompée, who is a hundred times more a coward than I am myself? to travel half-way across France alone, or nearly so? Oh, no! I will not go, I swear it! I should die of fear before I arrived."

"Oh, Monsieur le Vicomte," rejoined Richon, laughing aloud, "do you forget the sword hanging by your side, pray?"

"Laugh if you please, but I will not budge. Madame la Princesse promised me that you should go with me, and I agreed to make the journey only on that condition."

"That's as you please, viscount," said Richon, with assumed gravity. "However, they count upon you at Chantilly; and have a care, for princes soon lose patience, especially when they expect money."

"To cap the climax," said the viscount, "I must start during the night – "

"So much the better," laughed Richon; "no one will see that you are afraid, and you will encounter greater cowards than yourself, who will run away from you."

"You think so?" said the viscount, by no means at ease, despite this reassuring suggestion.

"But there's another way of arranging the matter," said Richon; "your fear is for the money, is it not? Very well, leave the money with me, and I will send it by three or four trustworthy men. But, believe me, the best way to make sure that it arrives safely is to carry it yourself."

"You are right, and I will go, Richon; as my bravery must go all lengths, I will keep the money. I fancy that her Highness, judging by what you tell me, is even more in need of the money than of myself; so perhaps I should not be welcome if I arrived empty-handed."

"I told you, when I first came, that you have a very martial air; moreover, the king's soldiers are everywhere, and there is no war as yet; however, don't trust to them too much, but bid Pompée load his pistols."

"Do you say that simply to encourage me?"

"Of course; he who realizes his danger doesn't allow himself to be taken by surprise. You had best go now," continued Richon, rising; "the night will be fine, and you can be at Monlieu before morning."

"Will our friend, the baron, play the spy when we go?"

"Oh! at this moment he is doing what we have just done, – eating his supper, that is to say; and although his supper may not have been as good as ours, he is too much of a *bon-vivant* to leave the table without a weighty reason. But I will go down and keep his attention diverted."

"Apologize to him for me for my rudeness. I don't choose that he shall pick a quarrel with me, if we meet some day when he is less generously disposed than to-day; for your baron must be a very punctilious sort of fellow."

"You have hit the right word; he would be just the man to follow you to the ends of the world simply to cross swords with you; but I will make your excuses, never fear."

"Do so by all means; but wait till I am gone."

"You may be very sure that I will."

"Have you no message for her Highness?"

"Indeed I have; you remind me of the most important thing of all."

"Have you written to her?"

"No; there are but two words to say to her."

"What are they?"

"*Bordeaux. – Yes.*"

"She will know what they mean?"

"Perfectly; and on the faith of those two words she may set out in full confidence; you may say to her that I will answer for everything."

"Come, Pompée," said the viscount to the old squire, who just then partly opened the door, and showed his head in the opening; "come, my friend, we must be off."

"Oh!" exclaimed Pompée; "can it be that Monsieur le Vicomte thinks of starting now. There is going to be a frightful storm."

"What's that you say, Pompée?" rejoined Richon. "There's not a cloud in the sky."

"But we may lose our way in the dark."

"That would be a difficult thing to do; you have simply to follow the high-road. Besides, it's a superb moonlight night."

"Moonlight! moonlight!" muttered Pompée; "you understand, of course, that what I say is not on my own account, Monsieur Richon."

"Of course not," said Richon; "an old soldier!"

"When one has fought against the Spaniards, and been wounded at the battle of Corbie – "pursued Pompée, swelling up.

"One doesn't know what fear is, eh? Oh, well, that is most fortunate, for Monsieur le Vicomte is by no means at ease, I warn you."

"Oh!" exclaimed Pompée, turning pale, "are you afraid?"

"Not with you, my good Pompée," said the viscount. "I know you, and I know that you would sacrifice your own life before anything should happen to me."

"To be sure, to be sure," rejoined Pompée; "but if you are too much afraid, we might wait until to-morrow."

"Impossible, my good Pompée. So take the gold and put it in your saddle-bags; I will join you in a moment."

"It's a large sum to expose to the risks of a journey at night," said Pompée, lifting the bag.

"There's no risk; at all events, Richon says so. Are the pistols in the holsters, the sword in the scabbard, and the musket slung on its hook?"

"You forget," replied the old squire, drawing himself up, "that when a man has been a soldier all his life, he doesn't allow himself to be caught napping. Yes, Monsieur le Vicomte, everything is in its place."

"The idea," observed Richon, "that any one could be afraid with such a companion! A pleasant journey to you, viscount!"

"Thanks for the wish; but it's a long way," replied the viscount, with a residuum of distress which Pompée's martial bearing could not dissipate.

"Nonsense!" said Richon; "every road has a beginning and an end. My respectful homage to Madame la Princesse; tell her that I am at her service and Monsieur de La Rochefoucauld's while I live, and do not forget the two words, —*Bordeaux, Yes.* I will go and join Monsieur de Canolles."

"Look you, Richon," said the viscount, laying his hand upon his companion's arm as he put his foot on the first stair, "if this Canolles is such a gallant officer and honorable gentleman as you say, why should not you make some attempt to win him over to our side? He might overtake us at Chantilly, or even on the way thither; as I have some slight acquaintance with him, I would present him."

Richon looked at the viscount with such a strange smile that he, reading upon the partisan's face what was passing through his mind, made haste to add, —

"Consider that I said nothing, Richon, and act as you think you ought to act in the premises. Adieu!"

He gave him his hand and hastily returned to his room, whether in dread that Richon would see the sudden blush that overspread his face, or that Canolles, whose noisy laughter they could plainly hear, would hear their voices.

He therefore left the partisan to descend the stairs, followed by Pompée, who carried the valise with an air of studied indifference, so that no one might suspect the nature of its contents; having waited a few moments, he cast his eye around the room to make sure that he had forgotten nothing, extinguished the candles, stole cautiously down to the ground-floor, venturing a timid glance through the half-open door of a brilliantly lighted room on that floor, and, wrapping himself closely in a heavy cloak, which Pompée handed him, placed his foot in the squire's hand, leaped lightly into the saddle, scolded the old soldier good-naturedly for his moderation, and disappeared in the darkness.

As Richon entered the room occupied by Canolles, whom he had undertaken to entertain while the little viscount was making his preparations for departure, a joyful shout issuing from the baron's mouth, as he sat uncertainly upon his chair, proved that he bore no ill-will.

Upon the table, between two transparent bodies which had once been full bottles, stood a thick-set wicker-covered vessel, proud of its rotundity, through the interstices of which the bright light of four candles caused a sparkling as of rubies and topazes. It was a flask of the old Collioure vintage, whose honeyed flavor is so delicious to the overheated palate. Appetizing dried figs, biscuit, almonds, and high-flavored cheeses bore witness to the shrewdness of the inn-keeper's reckoning, as the two empty bottles and a third but half filled demonstrated its exactitude. Indeed, it was certain that whoever should partake of that tempting dessert would necessarily, however sober he might ordinarily be, consume a great quantity of liquid food.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.