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The Constable De Bourbon

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William Ainsworth
The Constable De Bourbon

BOOK I. – THE AFFRONT

I. FONTAINEBLEAU

On a fine day, in the early part of June, 1523, a splendid cavalcade, consisting of three hundred well-mounted gentlemen, habited in velvet, and each having a massive gold chain round his neck, entered the Forest of Fontainebleau from the side of Nemours, and proceeded along an avenue bordered by noble trees towards the palace.

For the most part, the persons composing this brilliant troop were young and handsome cavaliers, whose looks and haughty bearing proclaimed their high birth, but there were some veterans among them, whose bronzed visages and martial deportment showed that they had served in many a hard campaign. But all were equally richly attired in the sumptuous livery of their leader – black velvet embroidered with gold – and their pourpoints and the housings of their steeds bore a princely badge, woven in gold, together with a sword wrought in the same material, which denoted that their lord held the office of Constable, one of the highest military dignities of France.

The leader of the troop, a very striking personage, whom it was impossible to regard without interest, was a man of large stature, with handsome, strongly-marked features, very stern in expression. An ample chest and muscular throat indicated the possession of great personal strength, but his frame, though stalwart, was admirably proportioned, and it was easy to discern, from the manner in which he bestrode his steed – a powerful block charger – that he was a consummate horseman. His looks and deportment were those of one accustomed to command. If not absolutely young, he was in the very prime of life, being just thirty-three. His complexion was swarthy, his eyes dark and piercing, and his beard, which he wore exceedingly long, black as jet. His firm-set mouth betokened inflexible resolution, while his towering forehead indicated great sagacity. Though he was magnificently arrayed, his bearing showed that he was not one of the silken gallants who thronged the gay and chivalrous court of François I., and who delighted in the banquet, the masquerade, or the tournay – but a hardy warrior, who had displayed prowess in the field, and could lead hosts to conquest.

Like his followers, this noble-looking personage was Clad in black velvet, but his habiliments were ornamented with precious stones. His girdle was set thick with gems, as was the handle of his poniard, and his plumed toque was ornamented in a similar manner. Around his neck he wore the superb collar of the order of Saint Michael, bestowed upon him by François I., and upon the caparisons of his steed was embroidered a sword, a symbol of the dignity with which he had been invested some eight years ago, on the accession of the Duke d'Angoulême to the throne of France.

This noble warrior, who equalled Roland in bravery and military science, was the illustrious Charles de Bourbon, Constable of France. At this time Bourbon was the most redoubtable person in the kingdom, as well from his daring and ambitious character, as from the power which he derived from his vast possessions. As the second prince of the blood – the Duc d'Alençon being the first – he was not many degrees removed from the throne, which the descendants of his house occupied at a later period. Sprung from Saint Louis, by that monarch's sixth son, he was head of the branch Bourbon-Montpensier, and had espoused Suzanne, daughter of the Duchess Bourbon-Beaujeu, herself the eldest daughter of Louis XI., and widow of Duke Pierre de Bourbon. The Duchess Suzanne had died

about six months previously, leaving Bourbon without issue, for her three children had preceded her to the grave.

The Constable de Bourbon's possessions were immense. Whole provinces belonged to him, in which he exercised feudal sovereignty. His titles were Duke de Bourbon, Duke d'Auvergne, Comte de Montpensier, Comte de Forez, Comte de la Marche, Vicomte of Carlat and Murat, and Seigneur of Combrailles and La Roche en Reigniers. In Poitou he had the duchy of Châtelleraut, and in Picardy the earldom of Clermont. These vast possessions, combined with his pretensions to the throne and ambitious character, naturally excited the jealousy of François I. Other causes conspired to heighten the king's dislike of him. The victory of Marignan, which signalised the first campaign of François in Italy, and gained for him the duchy of Milan, was virtually won by Bourbon. Though the Constable did not boast of the achievement, his haughty manner offended the king, who sought on several occasions to lower his pride, but only succeeded in irritating him.

In Louise de Savoie, Duchess d'Angoulême, and mother of the king, Bourbon found an active and powerful enemy. Though she was thirteen years older than the Constable, the duchess had conceived a violent passion for him, and, in order to forward his ambitious views, Bourbon feigned to respond to it. But he soon threw off the mask, and treated her with indifference. For a time, the Duchess d'Angoulême contented herself with brooding over her wrongs, perhaps believing her faithless lover would return, but when he completed his perfidy by uniting himself to Suzanne de Bourbon-Beaujeu, an alliance which greatly increased his wealth and power, by uniting two branches of the family, the hostility of the duchess took a more decided form. By her advice the large pensions bestowed upon Bourbon by the king were recalled, and other indignities were offered him.

Bourbon was too proud to complain of these unworthy proceedings, but his mother-in-law, the haughty old Duchess de Bourbon-Beaujeu, sought an interview with the Duchess d'Angoulême, and bitterly reproached her with the injustice done to her son-in-law. The indignation and menaces of the daughter of Louis XI. produced some effect, and the Duchess d'Angoulême promised that the pensions should be restored. But she did not keep her word.

Bourbon worthily avenged himself by making it manifest that he was independent of court patronage. On the birth of his son he prayed the king to stand sponsor for the child, and François assented. The baptismal ceremony took place at the Château de Moulins, and the entertainments given on the occasion were on a scale of more than regal splendour, the Constable's retinue being larger and more magnificent than that of the king. François was greatly offended at this display, and his mother took advantage of his anger to propose to him a scheme for the complete humiliation of the haughty duke. This was no less than to despoil Bourbon of all his vast possessions – an iniquitous design which she proposed to accomplish by setting up a claim to the succession as direct heiress of the elder branch of the house of Bourbon. The claim was as unjust as iniquitous, but the Chancellor Duprat, who owed his post to her, and who was her confidant and adviser, told her that by suborning the judges, and by using all the influence of the king, it could be established. For a long time François refused to listen to the odious proposition, but his mother persisted, and in the end he yielded. The duchess was aided in her vindictive plan by the numerous enemies whom Bourbon's pride had raised up against him, but chiefly by the king's favourite, the Admiral Bonnivet, the rival and enemy of the Constable.

Bonnivet, of whom we shall have to speak more fully anon, was the handsomest man at court, and distinguished as much for his gallantry as for his remarkable graces of person. Envy of Bourbon's rank and power, apprehension that he might regain his influence over the Duchess d'Angoulême, and through her govern the king, conspired to make Bonnivet dread and detest the Constable, and he became a ready instrument in the duchess's hands, losing no opportunity of inflaming the king's anger against the best and bravest of his nobles. A scornful remark of Bourbon converted Bonnivet into an implacable enemy, and made him eager for the Constable's destruction. A magnificent fête was given by the Admiral at his château in Poitou. Resolved that Bourbon should witness his rival's

splendid hospitality, the king took him to Bonnivet's château, and thinking to mortify him, asked him if he did not think it splendid?

"I have only one fault to find, sire," replied Bourbon. "The cage is too large and too fine for the bird."

"You are piqued, cousin," rejoined the king. "You are jealous of the Admiral."

"I jealous of Bonnivet!" exclaimed Bourbon, with deep scorn. "How could I be jealous of one whose ancestors would have deemed it an honour to be esquires in my house?"

This bitter speech was reported by the king to his favourite, and, as we have said, rendered the latter Bourbon's implacable foe.

From this moment, Bonnivet wanted no urging from the Duchess d'Angoulême to injure Bourbon in the king's opinion. Nothing but the downfal of the Constable would now content him. Moved by his favourite's representations, which were seconded by the wily Duprat, and yielding to his own jealous feelings, the king at last gave consent to a measure which was fraught with disastrous consequences to himself, and nearly cost him his throne. A feudal process was commenced by the Duchess d'Angoulême, designed to dispossess the Constable de Bourbon of his vast territories. This suit, impolitic as well as unjust, was sustained by the king's advocate, Bizet, and by the duchess's advocate, Guillaume Poyet. It was impolitic, we say, for it was undertaken at a juncture when a war with the Emperor Charles V. caused François to require the aid of all his great nobles, and especially of so sagacious a commander as Bourbon. From its importance and long duration, and from the illustrious personages concerned in it, the process excited the attention of all Europe, and the wily Emperor failed not to take advantage of the opportunity of alienating so able a commander as Bourbon, and caused secret overtures to be made to him. Henry VIII., also discerning the great mistake that François had committed, entered into a league with the Emperor to reduce the power of France. Both these monarchs regarded Bourbon as the most important auxiliary they could obtain; but François, insensible to the danger, allowed the process to go on. That the issue would be adverse to the Constable, little doubt could be entertained. The Parliament of Paris showed themselves disposed to comply with the king's wishes, and it was almost certain that a decree would be pronounced in favour of the Duchess d'Angoulême. But before the matter was decided, Suzanne de Bourbon died, leaving the duke, as we have stated, without issue.

This event, which revived the smouldering fire in the breast of the Duchess d'Angoulême, and awakened new hopes, caused her to suspend operations for a time. Bourbon had been a widower for six months, during which he had remained at the Château de Moulins, when he was summoned by the king to Fontainebleau, and set out at once, attended, as was his custom, by a numerous and splendid escort. He rested on the last night of his journey at the Château de Nemours, in order to reach Fontainebleau at noon.

Amid the crowd of nobles and gentlemen who accompanied him were René de Bretagne, Comte de Penthièvre, and Jean de Poitiers, Seigneur de Saint-Vallier, and Comte de Valentinois. The latter belonged to one of the oldest families in France, and had been governor of Dauphiné during the reign of the late king Louis XII. He had raised a large number of men for François I. during the war in Italy, and, like Bourbon, had good cause to complain of the king's neglect and ingratitude. Saint-Vallier's daughter, the beautiful Diane de Poitiers, had recently married Louis de Brézé, Comte de Maulévrier, grand seneschal of Normandy. Saint-Vallier was somewhat stricken in years, his beard and locks were grizzled, and his noble countenance had a grave and melancholy expression, as if he foresaw the misfortunes in store for him. He was a man of the highest honour, and Bourbon, who had great faith in his judgment, generally consulted him. Of the gentlemen in attendance upon the Constable, the two in whom he chiefly confided were the Seigneurs Pompérant and Lurcy, both young men of good family, graceful in exterior, mettlesome, proud, and eager for distinction.

Since the accession of François I., the old feudal château of Philippe Auguste and Saint Louis had been almost entirely demolished, and had given place to a superb palace, reared in the style of

the Renaissance. François I. had not as yet completed his grand designs, but he had done enough to make the Palace of Fontainebleau one of the noblest structures in France. Its splendid apartments were full of objects of art, paintings, and sculpture brought from Italy, and its glorious gallery, just completed, was richly decorated. The old walls and moat of the mediaeval chateau had given place to delicious gardens, with broad terraces, parterres, alleys, fountains, lakes, bosquets, and all that could contribute to enjoyment. As Bourbon drew near the palace, and gazed at its magnificent façade, he could not refuse it the meed of admiration it so well deserved.

The approach of the Constable and his suite was watched by a number of arquebusiers, pages, grooms, and serving-men, collected in the outer court, or grouped upon the great horse-shoe stairs leading to the principal entrance of the palace. Various comments were made by these persons on the number and splendour of the Constable's retinue, and the general opinion seemed to be that the king would take offence at the display. Among the observers were two magnificently-attired seigneurs, who, being stationed on the summit of the lofty stairs, commanded a complete view of the scene. Evidently, from the respect with which they were treated, these persons were of the highest rank. The most noticeable of the two – though both were noticeable – was a very distinguished-looking man, in age about thirty-five, though he did not look so much, and possessing features of classical regularity, and a figure of incomparable grace. In stature he was a little above the ordinary height, and his deportment was haughty and commanding. His rich brown locks were shorn close, as was then the mode, and he wore a pointed beard à l'Espagnole. Both for his graceful exterior and fascinating manner he seemed formed to captivate, and indeed almost all those whom he had addressed – and he made the highest dames his mark – had found him irresistible. He was accounted the handsomest, as well as the most accomplished cavalier at court, and excelled all his compeers in manly exercises, as he surpassed them in grace.

This preux chevalier was Guillaume Gouffier de Boisy, Seigneur de Bonnivet, Admiral of France. From the favour bestowed upon him by his royal master, he was called "le Grand Mignon du Roi." Audacious in love as in war, equally at home in the mêlée or at the masked ball, Bonnivet was the most gallant and profligate personage of the most gallant and profligate court in Europe, he had fought by the side of his royal master at the battle of Marignan, and was subsequently sent by François as ambassador-extraordinary to England, where he distinguished himself at the gorgeous court of Henry VIII. by his unparalleled magnificence. Brave to a fault, rash, enterprising, spiritual, lively, a boon companion, inordinately addicted to gallantry, Bonnivet exactly suited the king. A perfect courtier, he maintained his influence over François, while he strengthened his position by ingratiating himself with the king's mother. His prodigality was excessive, and his audacity in love affairs unparalleled. If we are to believe Brantôme, he resorted to the most extraordinary stratagems in the prosecution of his amours, and had trap-doors contrived in the chambers of his château. He was the secret lover of the king's mistress, the beautiful Comtesse de Châteaubriand, and he even dared to raise his eyes to the Duchess d'Alençon, the king's sister. To Louise de Savoie he was so subservient, that he became little better than her tool, but she requited him by showering favours on his head. It was by her desire that the command of the army of Guienne was bestowed upon him; and he had but recently returned to court, flushed with the successes he had gained over the Spaniards in Fontarabia.

Vain and presumptuous, Bonnivet had offended most of the old commanders, but, being supported by the king and the duchess, he was unassailable.

The person who stood next to Bonnivet, and who watched Bourbon's approach with as much surprise and as much curiosity as the Admiral, was very different in appearance and manner from the royal favourite, though equally richly attired. Though not handsome, he had a striking countenance, and his deportment was proud and martial. He was no other than the renowned Anne de Montmoreney, one of the haughtiest and wealthiest nobles of France, and one of the bravest of her captains. Though he did not envy Bonnivet the king's favour, nor seek to supplant him, he held him in contempt, and would probably have rejoiced in his downfall. Montmorency belonged to a ruder and

hardier school than that represented by the Admiral, and had distinguished himself by many feats of arms and personal courage. On account of his valour and military skill he had just been named a marshal of France by the king.

"By Heaven! it *is* the Constable de Bourbon!" cried Bonnivet. "What brings him to Fontainebleau?"

"I know not," replied Montmorency, "but I trust he may be restored to the king's favour, and this abominable process abandoned."

"That is not likely to be the case," remarked Bonnivet. "If Bourbon humbles himself, the king may overlook his faults – not otherwise."

"I have yet to learn what faults he has committed," said Montmorency. "I know he has been unjustly treated, and so I shall not hesitate to tell the king."

"You had better not say as much to the duchess," remarked Bonnivet.

"Wherefore not?" demanded the marshal. "If this suit is pressed to an issue, mischievous consequences are sure to follow, and I therefore hope it may be amicably arranged. From Bourbon's appearance here, I augur favourably. If I can help to set the matter right, I will."

"Take my advice, marshal, and do not meddle in the matter," said Bonnivet. "You will only incur the duchess's displeasure."

"I care not for that," said Montmorency.

"And yet it is to the duchess you owe your bâton. You are ungrateful, monsieur le maréchal."

These words were not uttered by Bonnivet, but by a singular personage, who had approached them unawares, and listened to their discourse. On turning, Montmorency beheld Triboulet, the king's jester. The court buffoon wore the parti-coloured garb proper to his office, and carried a bauble in his hand. Misshapen in person, he had high shoulders, long arms, large feet and hands, and an immense head. His brow was low, his eyes lighted up by a malicious flame, and his countenance altogether had a cunning and mischievous expression, which inspired fear while it excited mirth.

Immediately behind Triboulet stood a tall, thin man, whose appearance offered a striking contrast to that of the jester. This personage wore a black taffeta robe with loose sleeves, and a silken skull-cap of the same hue, which set off his sallow features. His eyes were thoughtful in expression, and a long grey beard, descending to his girdle, added materially to the gravity of his aspect. This individual was the renowned Cornelius Agrippa, who after many years of travel and strange adventure in Germany, Switzerland, the Low Countries, and England, now formed part of the royal household of France, and occupied the post of physician and astrologer to the Duchess d'Angoulême, who had great faith in his medical and mystic lore. Though the courtiers affected to deride Agrippa's predictions, and sometimes charged him with dealing in the black art, they nevertheless stood in great awe of him.

"Why dost charge me with ingratitude, thou ribald knave?" said Montmorency to the jester.

"Because you turn upon your benefactress," replied Triboulet.

"Bah! I have got no more than my due," said Montmorency. "Thou shouldst talk of my ingratitude to the duchess – à propos of the Constable de Bourbon."

"Her highness has no reason to be grateful to the Constable," said Triboulet, with a strange grin.

"But the king has," rejoined Montmorency. "Without him, Marignan would scarce have been won. I would rather lose my marshal's bâton than Bourbon should be deprived of his possessions."

"The king shall hear of this," muttered Bonnivet. "Did the stars tell you that Bourbon would come here to-day, learned sir?" he added to Cornelius Agrippa.

"I expected him," replied the philosopher.

"Then possibly you know his errand?" continued Bonnivet, with an incredulous smile.

"I know it," replied Agrippa, gravely. "I could tell you why he comes, and what will befal him, but I care not to read the future to those who mock my lore. The star of Bourbon is temporarily obscured. But it will break out with added splendour. This day is the turning-point of his destiny. If he stays here he will be great – but if he departs he will be greater."

"How are we to interpret that, compère?" inquired Triboulet,

"As you will," rejoined Agrippa, contemptuously. "The words of wisdom are unintelligible to fools. But mark me, messeigneurs," he added to Bonnivet and Montmoreney. "The destinies of the king, the duchess, and the Constable, are this day linked together – but the influencing power resides in Bourbon."

"Why in him? Explain your meaning, doctor!" demanded Bonnivet.

"I have said all I care to say," replied Agrippa. "But here comes the Constable. Will you stay and bid him welcome?"

"No, I will in, and inform the king of his arrival," said Bonnivet.

"You will find his majesty in the grand gallery," said Agrippa. "I left him there, not many minutes since, with the Comtesse de Chateaubriand."

"I will go thither," replied Bonnivet, hastening across the vestibule.

"Methinks the Constable is like a wild beast about to fall into a trap," remarked Triboulet to the astrologer. "Were I the king, if I once caught him, I would not let him go."

"Neither would I," replied Agrippa, significantly. "But his majesty cannot read the future."

By this time Bourbon had dismounted from his charger, and was received with the ceremony due to his exalted rank by the chamberlain, who descended the stairs to meet him. Pages, esquires and gentlemen bowed as the haughty Constable mounted the steps, and when he readied the summit the Marshal de Montmoreney advanced to meet him, and a very cordial greeting passed between them.

"I am right glad to see you here again, prince," said the marshal. "I hope we shall soon gather fresh laurels together in the Milanese."

"I should rejoice to fight by your side," replied Bourbon. "But I know not why I have been sent for by the king."

"Have you been sent for?" said Montmoreney, surprised. "I thought you came of your own accord. So much the better. You will be well received. The king is in a very gracious humour – and so is the duchess."

"Ah! the duchess!" exclaimed Bourbon, with an expression of deep disgust.

"You do not speak of her highness as she speaks of you, prince," observed Triboulet. "I have heard her sigh and seen her change colour at the mention of your name."

Bourbon made no reply to this remark, but graciously returned the salutation addressed to him by Cornelius Agrippa. A slight sign from the astrologer, who was standing within the vestibule, drew him towards him.

"I would fain have a word with your highness," said Agrippa, as the Constable approached him. "I have been consulting your horoscope."

"Ha! what have you found therein, good doctor?" asked Bourbon, who was by no means free from superstition.

"Much," replied Agrippa, gravely. "This is a critical hour with you, prince – the most critical hour of your existence, since it forms the turning-point of your career. According as you now act, so will your future destiny be influenced. Comply with certain propositions which will be made you, and which will in no respect affect your honour, and your position will be assured, and you will be elevated to almost supreme power. Decline them – "

"What then?" demanded Bourbon, fixing his dark eyes searchingly upon the astrologer.

"Decline them, I repeat," pursued Agrippa, "and you will incur great perils – very great perils – but you will baffle the schemes of your enemies, and obtain brilliant successes."

"You promise this, doctor?" cried Bourbon, eagerly.

"The stars promise it you, prince, not I," returned Agrippa. "But I have more to tell, if you have courage to hear it," he added, gravely.

"Say on! – let me know all," cried Bourbon.

"You will not long enjoy your triumph. You will meet a warrior's death before the walls of a great city."

"The very death I covet," said the Constable. "Take this, doctor," he added, detaching a gem from his doublet, and giving it him. "Your prognostication decides me."

"A word more and I have done," said Agrippa, lowering his tone. "You will gain friends as powerful as those you will lose. There are other monarchs who can better appreciate your noble qualities than the King of France."

Bourbon looked at the astrologer, as if he would fain question him further, but the latter signified by a glance that he had nothing more to impart, and the Constable left him and followed the chamberlain, who led him across the vestibule towards the doors of the grand gallery, before which ushers and a guard of halberdiers were stationed.

II. FRANÇOIS I

The magnificent gallery which we are now about to enter had only just been completed, and formed the principal ornament of the palace, though it was subsequently eclipsed by another and yet more magnificent gallery reared by Henri II. The gallery of François I., which still exists, though reft of some of its ancient splendour, was of great length, admirably proportioned, and possessed a superb plafond, painted by the best Italian masters, and supported by a grand gilt cornice. The walls were adorned with colossal figures of goddesses and nymphs carved in oak, and between these statues were introduced admirable paintings. On either side were lofty windows with deep embrasures, embellished like the walls with carvings and paintings. The windows on the left looked on an exquisite orange-garden, while those on the right commanded a spacious court, with a fountain, a chef-d'ouvre of art, in the midst of it.

At the upper end of the grand gallery a brilliant party was now assembled. Chief among them, not merely in point of rank, but for his lofty stature, majestic and graceful deportment, and splendid habiliments, was François I. At this period, the king, who was still under thirty, was in the full éclat of his manly beauty. So lofty was his stature, that he towered above the tallest of his courtiers, and his person was strongly but admirably proportioned. With his remarkable physiognomy, rendered familiar by the breathing portrait of Titian, all are acquainted. All can conjure up that countenance, so handsome, intellectual, refined, haughty, sarcastic, of which perhaps the sole fault was that the principal feature was too prominent – a peculiarity which caused the monarch to be popularly surnamed *François le grand nez*. The king's eyes were dark and full of fire, and his clear skin was set off by a pointed beard. His brown locks were cut short, in consequence of a severe wound he had received on the head, and as a matter of course the fashion had been followed by his courtiers. His teeth were magnificent, and were constantly displayed, his countenance being rarely without a smile. His expression was jovial and good humoured, though somewhat proud and sarcastic; his deportment full of majesty, but he was so affable that he set all who approached him at ease. Familiarity, however, was never attempted with François, even by his greatest favourites. In a word, he fully merited the appellation to which he aspired, and which was universally bestowed upon him, of the First Gentleman in Europe.

François I. was not remarkable merely for his personal accomplishments and graces. His mental qualifications were of a very high order. If not erudite or profound, he was well read. He was fond of poetry, and was himself a poet. He delighted in romances of chivalry, "Lancelot du Lac," "Garin le Lorrain," and took for his model the peerless "Amadis de Gaule." In consequence of his predilection for them, the favourite books with the gallants and dames of his court were "Gérard de Nevers," "Pierre de Provence et la Belle Magueloune," and "Petit Jehan de Saintré." Not merely was François I. a lover of literature, and a patron of poets and men of learning, but he warmly encouraged the arts, and his court was frequented by the best painters, sculptors, and architects, whom he brought from Italy.

Endowed with some of the highest and noblest qualities, by nature frank, loyal, and chivalrous, though fiery and impetuous, passionately fond of war, and always thirsting for military renown, François was a perfect type of the nation over which he ruled, and next to Henri IV., who to a certain extent based himself upon him, is the best loved of the French monarchs. His splendid person and noble features, his kingly deportment, his accomplishments, his martial tastes, his courage, his address in the tilt-yard and in the management of arms of all kinds, pike, rapier, two-handed sword, his unequalled skill and grace in horsemanship, his jovial humour, his bonhomie, his devotion to the fair sex, are dwelt upon with satisfaction, and his faults overlooked or forgotten. The following poetical portrait of him is far too brightly coloured:

C'est luy qui a grâce et parler de maître,
Digne d'avoir sur tous droit et puissance,
Qui sans nommer, se peut assez connoître.
C'est luy qui a de tout la comioissance.
De sa beauté il est blanc et vermeil,
Les cheveux bruns, de grande et belle taille;
En terre il est comme au ciel le soleil.
Hardi, vaillant, sage et preux en bataille,
Il est bénin, doux, humble en sa grandeur,
Fort et puissant, et plein de patience.

The faults of François I. were profligacy and prodigality More than once he exhausted his treasury by the immense sums he lavished upon his mistresses and his favourites. So completely did he yield to his love of pleasure, that the greater part of his life which was not occupied in the field was spent in sybaritic enjoyments. Though not tyrannical, he was capricious and vindictive, and not unfrequently strained the royal prerogative to the utmost.

On this occasion the splendid person of the king was displayed to the utmost advantage by his magnificent attire. His habiliments were of white and blue – the colours of the Comtesse de Châteaubriand. His doublet, of azure velvet slashed and puffed with white silk, glittered with diamonds, and his girdle was ornamented with rubies and emeralds. Over his doublet he wore a white brocade mantle, trimmed with minever, and so fashioned as to display the puffed sleeves of his jerkin. The handle and sheath of his poniard were studded with gems, as was also the guard of his long rapier. His sky-blue velvet toque was encircled by a white plume, and ornamented by diamonds. The perfect symmetry of his lower limbs was displayed by his white silk hose, and below the knee he wore the Garter, with which he had been invested by Henry VIII. prior to their meeting at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. His buskins, of blue velvet slashed with white satin, like his doublet, were ornamented with pearls. He was vain of his small feet and finely-formed hands, and his fingers were loaded with magnificent rings. Around his neck he wore the collar of the order of Saint Michael.

The court of François I., as we have intimated, was not only attended by the first nobles, but by the most beautiful women of the kingdom, and, though distinguished more than any other of the period for splendour, refinement, and chivalry, was not remarkable for strictness and decorum, though the fair fame of his neglected consort, Queen Claude, was never impeached. But this devout and discreet princess was queen only in name. The hands that really held the reins of government were those of the Duchess d'Angoulême, while the king's affections were estranged by his mistresses.

The Comtesse de Châteaubriand, who at this time held absolute sway over the fickle heart of the amorous monarch, was in sooth a most lovely and fascinating creature. Françoise de Foix, daughter of Jean de Foix, Vicomte de Lautrec, and first cousin of the heroic Gaston de Foix, surnamed "*le Foudre d'Italie*" was early united to the Comte Laval de Chateaubriand, whose jealousy of her beauty induced him to immure her in a solitary chateau in Brittany. His precautions, however, were unavailing. François having heard of the incomparable charms of the countess, compelled her jealous spouse to bring her to court, and at once became passionately enamoured of her. The nature of Françoise de Foix was unambitious, and she might not have exercised the influence she possessed over the king beneficially but for her brothers, the elder of whom, Odet de Foix, Seigneur de Lautrec – a brave but not a successful leader – she made a marshal of France; while the Comte de Lesparre, the younger, also owed his advancement to her.

Françoise de Foix was tall, slender, and exquisitely proportioned. Her features were of extreme delicacy, her eyes large and of a tender blue, her eyebrows beautifully pencilled, her locks blonde, and her complexion ravishingly fair. Her attire was of white brocade, her long stomacher being covered with gems, while the girdle that encircled her narrow waist was studded with precious stones. Over

her gown she wore a surcoat of azure satin embroidered with gold, and having loose hanging sleeves. A magnificent head-dress of goldsmith's work confined her blonde tresses, and set off her lovely countenance. Françoise de Foix was as fascinating in manner as she was charming in person, and her royal lover seemed spellbound by her attractions. She was not, however, more faithful to him than she had been to her husband, but she had the art to conceal her infidelities, and never incurred his suspicions. Unable to brook his dishonour, the Comte de Châteaubriand had withdrawn wholly from court, and secluded himself in his lonely château in Brittany, where he meditated a terrible revenge, which he afterwards consummated. The end of the lovely countess was very tragical.

From the contemplation of the bewitching Françoise de Foix we must turn to another lovely woman, who formed part of the assemblage in the gallery. This was the king's sister, Marguerite de Valois, Duchess d'Alençon – La Marguerite des Marguerites, as she was styled by her royal brother, who tenderly loved her. Graceful of person, beautiful of feature, amiable in disposition, a model of virtue in a depraved court, united to a husband she could not respect, and who was incapable of appreciating her merits, yet to whom she was faithful, highly accomplished, learned, and witty, the Duchess d'Alençon was the chief ornament of the court of François I.

About two years subsequent to the period of our history Marguerite was liberated from her husband by death, and espoused in her second nuptials Henri d'Albret, King of Navarre – a consort in all respects better suited to her. As Queen of Navarre, her court was thronged by poets, savants, and men of letters. Clement Marot thus eulogises her:

Entre autres dons de grâces immortelles,
Madame écrit si haut et doucement,
Que je m'étonne, en voyant choses telles,
Qu'on n'en reçoit plus d'ebanissement.
Puis quand je l'ouis parler si sagement,
Et que je vois sa plume travailler,
Je tourne bride, et m'ébanis comment
On est si sot de s'en émerveiller.

Ronsard, then a handsome page, thus addresses her:

Ainsi tu fus, ô princesse,
Ançois plutôt, ô déesse,
Tu fus certes tout l'honneur
Des princesses de notre âge,
Soit en force de courage,
Ou soit en royal bonheur.

By some she was styled the Tenth Muse and the Fourth Grace. Her *Nouvelles*, which obtained a wonderful celebrity in her own day, may be classed with the *Decameron* of Boccaccio.

Marguerite was dressed in crimson velvet, richly embroidered, and her head-dress was of goldsmith's work, like that of the Comtesse de Châteaubriand. If she was not so fascinating as the latter syren, she possessed infinitely more dignity, and her features had an expression which nothing but purity can impart.

Many other beautiful and high-born dames and demoiselles were present, but we do not think it necessary to describe them, neither can we do more than allude to the brilliant collection of young seigneurs, all magnificently arrayed, by whom the king was attended.

"So you are resolved to go to Italy, sire," observed the Comtesse de Châteaubriand to the king, who was standing near an open window, gazing into the orange-garden. "Nothing that I can say will detain you."

"I must win back the duchy of Milan, which your brother, the Maréchal de Lautrec, has suffered Prospero Colonna and Pescara to wrest from me," rejoined François. "Had I been there, this would not have happened. I have been idle far too long, and must conduct the war in person."

"I trust it will be a brief campaign," sighed the countess.

"Doubt it not, ma mie," replied the king. "The duchy shall soon again be mine. During the winter I will hold my court at Milan, and you shall come thither, if you list."

"I would I might accompany you during the campaign, sire! Let me go with you, I entreat you!"

"No, that cannot be. You could not cross the Alps with the army. But you shall follow speedily. Nay, content you, mignonne. You shall go with me as far as Lyons."

At this moment, Bonnivet, who had come quickly down the gallery, approached them.

"You have some news for us?" said the king, looking inquiringly at him. "Any tidings from Bayonne, or from the Milanese?"

"None, sire," replied the Admiral. "I merely come to announce to you a most unexpected visitor. Not to keep you a moment in suspense, I will add that the Prince Mal-endurant has just arrived at the palace."

"The Constable de Bourbon arrived here!" exclaimed the countess.

"His arrival is not unexpected," replied the king, smiling. "In fact, I sent for him."

"You sent for him, sire!" exclaimed Bonnivet, surprised, and exchanging a glance with the countess. "I did not suppose you would adopt such a course. If I had been aware of it, I would have counselled you against it."

"And so would I," added the countess.

"For that very reason, I did not mention my design," remarked François. "What will you say, ma mie, if I should be reconciled to the Constable?" he added to the countess.

"I shall say that your majesty is not true to yourself," she replied, unable to conceal her vexation.

"Reconciliation with Bourbon is impossible, unless the Duchess d'Angoulême will forego her claim – and she will never do that!" cried Bonnivet.

"Hum!" exclaimed François. "One cannot tell what may happen. I always pay the greatest deference to my mother's wishes, and, as she has expressed a desire to see the Constable, I have sent for him."

"It is strange I should hear nothing of this before, sire," remarked Françoise de Foix, in a tone of pique.

"Not so strange as you think, mignonne," replied the king. "The duchess bound me to secresy."

"What can be the meaning of this?" thought Bonnivet. "The duchess hates Bourbon too deeply to make terms with him."

"I see it!" mentally ejaculated the countess, instinctively arriving at the truth. "Her love for Bourbon has been suddenly revived. But will he accept her terms? If I know him, he will not."

"Here comes the Constable," remarked François, as the tall and majestic figure of Bourbon was seen moving slowly down the gallery. He was preceded by the chamberlain, and followed by Saint-Vallier and René de Bretagne.

"He has not lost his insolent deportment," remarked the Admiral. "I ought to have informed your majesty that he has brought with him an escort of three hundred gentlemen."

The observations told, and a frown of displeasure passed over the king's brow. But it fled before Bourbon came up, and gave way to a gracious smile.

"Welcome, cousin," he cried, in a voice that bespoke cordiality. "I am right glad to see you again at Fontainebleau."

At the same time he advanced towards the Constable, and embraced him affectionately.

"Sire, your kindness overwhelms me," said Bourbon, moved by the warmth of the reception.

"You have been absent from court far too long, cousin – far too long," pursued the king. "Our sister the Duchess d'Alençon, and the Comtesse de Chateaubriand, will tell you how much we have missed you."

"It is not my fault that I have been absent, sire," replied Bourbon. "Your majesty will own that I had good reasons for keeping away."

"I wish you had come, notwithstanding, cousin," rejoined François. "A few words of personal explanation would have helped to set matters right. But you shall not depart till we have settled our differences."

"Then I must tarry long, sire," observed Bourbon, smiling sternly. "Your majesty, I hear, has been pleased to style me le Prince Mal-endurant, and I own that the appellation is merited, but I am not altogether as patient as you imagine."

"I do not wonder at it, cousin. Heaven knows, you have had good cause for anger! And if you have exhibited a patience worthy of the long-enduring patriarch himself, I admire you the more for it. But if I inflict injuries, I know how to repair them, and your wrongs shall be redressed."

"You own I have been wronged, sire?" exclaimed Bourbon. "That is something."

"Foi de gentilhomme! I will make you amends, cousin," cried the king. "You shall be abundantly satisfied."

Bourbon's sternness could not fail to give way before these and many other equally gracious expressions. It was evident that François desired to conciliate his offended visitor, and as he employed his irresistible fascination of manner to that end, he succeeded. The king next addressed himself to Saint-Vallier and René de Bretagne, greeting them both with marked condescension and kindness, and, while he was thus engaged, Bourbon paid his devoirs to the Duchess d'Alençon and the Comtesse de Châteaubriand. By the latter he was coldly received, but Marguerite de Valois accorded him a welcome as gracious as that of her royal brother. A haughty salutation passed between the Constable and Bonnivet.

"I must have a few words with you in private, cousin," said the king, turning to Bourbon, as soon as he had concluded his brief discourse with Saint-Vallier. "Come with me, I pray you."

The Constable bowed, and he and the king quitted the gallery, and entering a corridor on the left, proceeded to a suite of magnificent apartments which François himself had recently constructed. The most friendly understanding seemed already re-established between them. François treated the Constable like a brother, and placed his arm affectionately upon his shoulder.

"I will now avow the truth to you, cousin," he said. "This process has been a great pain to me, but there is only one way of settling it. Methinks you can readily guess that mode."

"No, sire, I confess I am completely puzzled," replied Bourbon.

"You are duller than I thought," said the king. "The matter rests with the Duchess d'Angoulême. You must talk it over with her."

"With the duchess, sire!" exclaimed Bourbon. "Impossible! You must hold me excused."

"Nay, I insist, cousin," rejoined François.

"The interview will be productive of no good, sire, and will rather aggravate existing difficulties. Again, I pray you to excuse me."

"Nay, I am resolved, cousin. I know what is for your good. Come with me to my mother's private cabinet. She expects you."

"Expects me!" cried Bourbon. "Then this is a preconcerted scheme. I warn your majesty it will fail."

"I will listen to no more objections," said François. "You will thank me for my firmness anon."

III. LOUISE DE SAVOIE

BOURBON yielded with an ill grace, and entered an ante-chamber with the king, in which several gentlemen and pages were assembled. Two ushers were stationed at a door at the farther end of the chamber. At the king's approach this door was thrown open, and Bourbon found himself in the presence of the person he most hated on earth.

The Duchess d'Angoulême was seated at a table, engaged in converse with the Chancellor Duprat, who arose on the king's entrance with Bourbon, and made a profound obeisance, but the duchess retained her seat.

Though at this time Louise de Savoie was nearer fifty than forty, she had by no means lost her personal attractions. She bestowed great care in the preservation of her charms, and Nature seconded her efforts, Careful, temperate, active, both in mind and body, ill health had produced no ravages upon her frame, and at forty-five – nay, even at forty-seven, which was her exact age when Bourbon appeared before her – the duchess looked younger than many an indolent beauty of thirty-five. Her complexion was fresh and blooming, her cheek rounded and full, her eyes bright, her brow white as marble and with scarcely a wrinkle, and her dark tresses entirely untinged with grey. In brief, she was still so handsome that it was supposed she must have discovered some wondrous potion for the preservation of her youth. Her figure was tall, and admirably proportioned, with a slight tendency to embonpoint, which she successfully combated by exercise and abstemiousness. It was from the duchess that François and Marguerite inherited their symmetry of form and beauty of feature. Her hands were small, white, soft, and dimpled, and her long taper fingers were covered with rings. Her deportment was majestic, and at times imperious. She did not neglect to heighten the effect of her charms and imposing appearance by richness of attire. On this occasion she was arrayed in purple cloth of gold tissue, her stomacher being embroidered all over with flat gold and damask. Her sleeves were paned with gold and quilted, and fastened with gold aiglets. She wore a partlet ornamented with rubies and other precious stones; her head-dress, diamond-shaped and having long side lappets, glittered with gems. From her neck hung a chain of gold, enamelled black, sustaining a magnificent diamond cross, and her girdle was ornamented with diamonds, rubies, and pearls. Over the king her son, as we have said, Louise de Savoie had early obtained an extraordinary ascendancy, which she never lost. He appointed her Regent of the kingdom when he set out on his first Italian campaign, and had resolved to entrust the government again to her care during the war which he now meditated for the repossession of the Milanese.

Ambitious of power, the Duchess d'Angoulême was also greedy and avaricious, and scrupled not to enrich herself from the royal treasures. Of a miserly disposition, she amassed money, not to spend, but hoard it, and she died possessed of enormous wealth.

Louise was the daughter of Philippe, Duke de Savoie, and Marguerite de Bourbon, and was wedded at the age of twelve to Charles d'Orléans, Comte d'Angoulême. Six years later she became a widow.

Bourbon's swarthy cheek flushed, and the blood mounted to his brow, as he stood before the duchess. Bowing haughtily, he remained at a little distance from her.

Approaching his mother, the king said, in his cheerful accents,

"I have brought back the truant chevalier, madame."

Adding a few words in a low tone, he turned to Bourbon, and telling him he would return anon, quitted the chamber with Duprat.

Left alone with the Constable, Louise regarded him anxiously and tenderly, but the stern expression of Bourbon's features underwent no change. The duchess, however, would not be discouraged, but said, in a gentle voice which she thought calculated to move him, "Dismiss that frown, Charles de Bourbon, and come and sit nigh me. Nay," she added, playfully, "I will be obeyed."

But Bourbon moved not, and his brow grew yet more sombre.

Presently she arose, and, stepping up to him, laid her hand gently upon his arm.

He shrank from her touch as if a viper had stung him.

Mastering her anger by a great effort, she said,

"Come, let us be friends, Charles de Bourbon. We have been enemies long enough."

"Friends, madame!" exclaimed Bourbon, bitterly. "You can scarcely expect it."

"But you will forgive me, Charles, will you not, when I tell you I still love you?" she rejoined.

"You are too old for love, madame – far too old," he rejoined, with a look almost of loathing. "You may have loved me years ago, though your conduct since would lead me to doubt it. But now the feeling ought to he – must be – a stranger to your breast."

"My love for you is strong as ever, and enables me even to bear this language from you," she said. Hear my explanation before you reproach me so severely."

"I have not reproached you, madame, but I say that your declarations are utterly inconsistent with your conduct. You have pursued me with unceasing animosity. By your instrumentality, madame – for I well know you were the cause of my removal – I was despoiled of my authority in the Milanese, which I had helped to win, and the government given to Lautrec, by whose mismanagement the fruits of the battle of Marignan were lost. Not only did you prevent the reimbursement of the large sums I had expended for the king's use in Italy, but you withheld the payment of my pensions as grand-chamberlain of France, as governor of Languedoc, and as Constable. I deserved better treatment from the king, but I knew from whom the wrongs proceeded, and made no complaint. This was not enough. By your instigation a deeper affront was offered me, I will not vaunt my military skill, though I had proved it sufficiently at Marignan, but I was excluded by you – by you, madame, for you directed the king – from the four grand military commanderships formed by his majesty, and given by him to the Duke d'Alençon, the Duke de Vendôme, Bonnivet, and Lautrec, Still I was patient."

"Why were you patient, Charles? Why did you not complain to me?" cried the duchess.

"Though deeply mortified by the affront," pursued Bourbon, disregarding the question, "I did not hesitate to obey the king's commands to join the army of Picardy, and brought with me six thousand well-armed fantassins, and three hundred lances. How was I requited? I need not tell you, madame, since the work was yours, that the command of the vanguard, which was mine by right, was given to the incapable D'Alençon. That affront was hard to bear, yet I *did* bear it. Well might the king call me the Prince Mal-endurant!"

"Again I ask you, Charles, why did you not appeal to me?" said the duchess.

"Appeal to you, madame – to the author of my wrongs!" rejoined the Constable, fiercely. "I would have died rather than so humiliate myself. Though profoundly wounded, I remained loyal in heart to the king. No act, no word evinced resentment. But, instead of disarming your animosity, my patience only aggravated it. You had not wreaked your vengeance sufficiently upon me. Disgrace was not enough. I must endure spoliation. You threw off the mask and assailed me in person. In concert with your unscrupulous adviser, Duprat, you contrived a diabolical plan to deprive me of the whole of my possessions. An infamous process was commenced against me, which has filled all France – all Europe – with astonishment. The finishing stroke has only to be put to your work. My property has been sequestrated by the Parliament, and may be confiscated. But beware, madame!" he added, in a voice of terrible menace. "Beware! A fearful retribution will follow."

"Threaten me not, Charles de Bourbon," she rejoined. "But listen. I do not deny the charges you have brought against me. Had you submitted to the first blow – had you sued for grace – all the rest would have been spared you."

"Sue for grace, madame! Sue for grace to you!" cried the Constable. "You know little of Charles de Bourbon if you think he would so demean himself."

"Hear me out," said the duchess. "I was determined to conquer your pride – to bring you to my feet – but you compelled me, by your inflexibility, to have recourse to harsher measures than I

originally intended. You have to thank yourself, Charles, for the punishment you have endured. But throughout it all, I have suffered more than you – far more."

"I am glad to hear it," remarked Bourbon. "But I doubt it.

"When I have seemed to hate you most, I have loved you best, Charles. My heart was torn by conflicting emotions – rage, grief, love. You had spurned my love, and few women could pardon such an affront. But I could forgive it, and would have forgiven you, if you had returned to me. But you ever held aloof. You forced me to go on. Blow after blow was dealt, in the hope that each might be the last. Oh, how it would have joyed me to restore you to the government of the Milanese! – to have ordered the payment of your pensions! – to have given you the command of the army of Picardy! But all can now be set right."

"Impossible, madame," rejoined Bourbon.

"Say not so, Charles. Since you have been made aware of my motives, you must view my conduct in a different light. Let the past be forgotten. Let all animosity be at an end between us. Henceforth, let us be friends – nay, more than friends. Do you not understand me, Charles?"

"I would fain not do so, madame," rejoined Bourbon, averting his gaze from her.

"Let not resentment blind you to your own interests, Charles," pursued the duchess. "You have felt my power to injure you. Henceforth, you shall find how well I can serve you. I can restore all you have lost – honours, commands, pensions. Nay, I can raise you higher than you have ever risen, and load you with wealth beyond your conception. All this I can do – and will do. Kneel down at my feet, Charles – not to supplicate my pardon, for that you have – but to renew those protestations of love which you once offered me. Kneel, I conjure you."

But Bourbon remained inflexible.

"My knees would refuse their office were I inclined to comply," he said.

"Then I must perforce take on myself the part which of right belongs to you, Charles. By the death of your spouse, Suzanne de Bourbon, you are free to wed again. I offer you my hand. You ought to solicit it on your bended knee – but no matter! – I offer it to you."

"Is the king aware of your design, madame? Does he approve of the step?" demanded Bourbon.

"The king sent for you at my instance to arrange the marriage," rejoined the duchess.

"His majesty's complaisance is carried to the extremest point," said Bourbon. "But he seems to have taken my assent for granted – as you have done, madame."

"We could not doubt it," said the duchess, smiling confidently. "The proposed union offers you too many advantages to be rejected."

"Enumerate them, I pray you?" said Bourbon. "First, then, the marriage will amicably settle the process between us, and will operate like a decree in your favour, for you will retain your possessions. Next, I shall bring you a royal dowry. As my husband, you will be second only in authority to the king. Nay, you will have greater power than he. You will find Louise de Savoi a very different wife from Suzanne de Bourbon. I will enrich you – I will augment your power – I will aggrandise you. You shall be king – all but in name."

"I doubt not your power to accomplish all this, madame," rejoined Bourbon. "I know your unbounded influence over your son. I know you have filled your coffers from the royal treasures – as was proved by the confession of the wretched Semblençay, who gave you the five million ducats he ought to have sent to Italy, and who paid the penalty of his folly with his life. I know that in effect you have already despoiled me of my possessions —

"Dwell on these matters no longer, Charles," she interrupted. "Forget the past, and look forward to a brilliant future. My offer is accepted? – speak!"

"You deem me so much abased that I must needs accept it, madame," said Bourbon. "But I am not yet fallen so low. I reject it – scornfully reject it."

"Reflect, Charles – reflect before you come to this fatal determination, for fatal it will be to you," she cried. "You are ruined – irretrievably ruined – if you wed me not."

"I would sooner be degraded from my rank – I would sooner mount the scaffold, than wed you, Louise de Savoie, my some time mistress, but now my bitter enemy," said the Constable, fiercely.

"Bourbon, I swear to you I am not your enemy," cried the duchess. "Do not regard me with scorn and hate. Look at me as a loving woman. My heart – my soul is yours. Since you will not stoop to me, I will do what I never yet did to man – I will kneel to you."

And she threw herself before him, and clasped his hands.

"Forgive me, Charles!" she cried, in half suffocated accents. "Forgive me for the great love I have ever borne you."

Notwithstanding the supplications and tears of the duchess, there was no symptom of yielding in Bourbon. With almost rudeness, he said, "Arise, madame. It is useless to prolong this interview. Farewell!"

"Stay, I command you, Charles de Bourbon," she said, rousing all her dignity. "For a moment I had forgotten myself, but your barbarous conduct has restored me. Henceforward I will banish your image from my breast, or only retain it there to animate my vengeance. Your possessions shall be at once confiscated. I will make you a beggar, and then see if you can find a wife among the meanest of my court dames."

"I shall not need to do so, madame," rejoined Bourbon, sternly. "Let it confound you to learn that the Emperor Charles V has offered me in marriage his sister Leanor, widow of the late King of Portugal.

"The Emperor has offered you his sister?" exclaimed the duchess. "It is false – it is false!"

"You will find it true, madame," said Bourbon, with a contemptuous smile.

"You shall never wed her," cried the duchess. "If you reject me, you shall wed no one else."

"These threats are idle, madame," rejoined Bourbon, scornfully. "I laugh at your impotent malice. You have wreaked your vengeance to the utmost. But you will never be able to subdue me to your will."

"Traitor and villain, I see through your designs!" cried the duchess. "You meditate reprisals through the enemies of your country. But I will effectually crush you. If your treasonable practices be proved, I will have your head – ay, your head, Charles de Bourbon."

"I have no fear for my head," laughed Bourbon, disdainfully. "It is safe enough, even though I am in the king's palace at Fontainebleau."

"A moment, Charles!" cried the duchess, suddenly relapsing into tenderness, and making an effort to detain him. "Are we to part thus?"

"How otherwise should we separate, madame, than with threats on your part – defiance on mine?" said Bourbon.

And with a haughty inclination he was about to depart, when the door was suddenly thrown open, and the king, unannounced, entered the cabinet.

IV. WHAT PASSED BETWEEN THE KING AND BOURBON

Evidently, François had expected a very different termination to the interview from that which had occurred. The smile fled from his countenance as he gazed at the pair.

"I have found him utterly impracticable," whispered the duchess. "But you may have better success."

"We shall see," replied the king, in the same tone. "Leave us alone together."

Casting a look at Bourbon, who haughtily averted his gaze from her, the duchess stepped towards the back of the cabinet and raised the hangings, behind which was a door communicating with her private apartments. Instead of passing through the door, however, she concealed herself behind the arras.

"Come, cousin," said François, approaching the Constable, and leaning good humouredly on his shoulder. "Cast off those moody looks. Have you quarrelled with my mother? If so, I will engage to set the matter right."

"I pray your majesty to let me go," rejoined Bourbon. "I am scarce master of myself, and: may offend you."

"No, you will not do that," replied the king. "I have more command of my temper than you have; and besides, I can make allowances for you. But you must not let your pride interfere with your interests."

"The duchess has told me so already, sire," cried Bourbon, impatiently. "I know what you design to say to me. I know the arguments you would employ. But the match cannot be brought about."

"Answer one question," said the king. "Is it nothing to be father-in-law to the King of France?"

"I am sensible enough of the distinction such an alliance would confer upon me, sire," replied the Constable. "But, for all that, I must decline it."

"Foi de gentilhomme! fair cousin, you are perverse enough to provoke me, but I will be calm," said the king, changing his attitude and tone. "Since argument is useless, I must exert my authority. By Saint Denis! the match *shall* take place. I will have no 'nay' from you. Now you understand."

"I hear what you say, sire," rejoined Bourbon, sternly. "But you cannot enforce compliance with the injunction. Not even at your bidding will I wed the Duchess d'Angoulême."

"You refuse! – ha?" demanded the king, fiercely.

"Absolutely," replied Bourbon. "I am a prince of the blood."

"What of that?" cried François, yet more highly incensed. "Were you a crowned king, you would not bemean yourself by marriage with my mother. It is she who degrades herself by stooping to you. But this," he added, checking himself, "cannot be your motive."

"No, sire, it is *not* my motive," rejoined Bourbon. "Since you force me to speak, you shall have the truth. I prefer death to dishonour."

"Dishonour!" echoed the king, astounded and enraged. "Dare you breathe such a word in connexion with my mother? What mean you? Speak!"

François looked at him with eyes that seemed to flash lightning. Bourbon, however, did not quail before the fierce looks and gestures of the king, but replied with stern significance:

"A man of my quality, sire, does not marry a wanton."

"Sang Dieu! this to me!" cried the king, transported with rage.

And he struck Bourbon in the face with his hand.

This mortal insult, as may be imagined, produced a fearful effect on the Constable. His first impulse was to slay his assailant, and his hand involuntarily clutched his sword. But he abandoned the insane design almost as soon as formed. In the effort to constrain himself, his frame and features were terribly convulsed, and a cry of rage that was scarcely human escaped him. The king watched him narrowly, prepared for attack, but manifesting no alarm.

"Sire," cried Bourbon, at length, "that was a craven blow, unworthy of one who aspires to be the first knight in Christendom. No other person but yourself, who had thus insulted me, should live. But you are safe. You have dishonoured me for ever. Take back the dignity you have bestowed upon me, and which I am unworthy longer to wear," he added, tearing the jewelled cross of Saint Michael from his breast, and casting it on the ground. "Others may fight for you. My sword shall never again be drawn in your service."

With a heart bursting with rage and grief, he rushed out of the room.

As Bourbon disappeared, the duchess came from behind the hangings.

"So, you have heard what has passed between us, madame?" cried the king.

"I have," she replied. "He is a false traitor and a liar, and has been rightly served. But you will not let him quit the palace? By that blow', which he richly deserved, you have made him your mortal enemy. You have him now in your hands, and you will rue it, if you suffer him to escape. He has many partisans, and may raise a revolt."

"You alarm yourself unnecessarily, madame," rejoined François.

"I have good reason for apprehension," rejoined the duchess. "He has already entered into secret negotiations with the Emperor."

"Foi de gentilhomme! if I thought so, I would order his instant arrest!" exclaimed the king. "But are you sure, madame? Have you any proof of what you assert?"

"He boasted, just now that the Emperor had offered him the widowed Queen of Portugal in marriage," replied the duchess. "Does not that prove that secret overtures have been made him?"

"You are right. He is more dangerous than I thought. I must prevent his defection – by fair means if possible – if not – ".

"You have provoked him too far, my son," interrupted the duchess. "He will never forgive the insult you have put upon him. Allow him to depart, and most assuredly he will league with your enemies."

At this moment Bonnivet entered the cabinet.

"Pardon me, sire, and you, gracious madame, if I venture to interrupt you," he said. "But I would know your majesty's commands in regard to the Constable. His demeanour and looks are so infuriated, and his language so full of menace, that I have ordered the guard not to let him quit the palace."

"You have done well, monseigneur," said the duchess. "Where is he now?"

"In the pavillon de Saint Louis," remarked Bonnivet, "with her majesty and the Dame de Beaujeu."

"I did not know the duchess was here," remarked Louise de Savoie, uneasily.

"She only arrived an hour ago from Paris," replied Bonnivet. "Ha! what is this I see?" he added, noticing the cross of Saint Michael, which Bourbon had cast on the ground. "Is it thus your honours are treated, sire? Such insolence deserves severe punishment."

"I would punish the offender – severely punish him – but that I gave him great provocation," returned the king. "You say that the Constable is in the salle de Saint Louis, with the queen and the Dame de Beau-jeu?"…

"He went thither not many minutes ago," replied Bonnivet. "Shall I arrest him as he comes forth?"

"No," said the king. "I will see him again, and then decide. Come with me, madame – and you too, Admiral."

V. THE DAME DE BEAUJEU

Prevented by the guard from quitting the palace, and nothing doubting that his arrest would speedily follow, Bourbon was slowly pacing the corridor, considering what course he should pursue, when an usher approached him, and, bowing reverently, informed him that the queen desired to speak with him.

The Constable willingly obeyed the summons, and was conducted to a magnificent hall, where he found the queen.

Her majesty was seated in a fauteuil, and beside her was an ancient dame of very striking appearance. Several court demoiselles and pages were in attendance, but they were stationed at the farther end of the hall.

The amiable qualities of Queen Claude were written in legible characters in her countenance. She was still young, and her features, though not beautiful, were pleasing. Her person was slightly deformed. It is quite clear she must have suffered deeply in secret, but profound as they were, her sorrows were breathed only to the ear of her confessor, or to Heaven. Her manner was singularly gentle, almost humble, and she rarely, if ever, manifested resentment against those who most deeply injured her. So saintly, indeed, was her conduct, that when she was released from her troubles, an event which occurred within a year from the date of our history, miracles were supposed to have been wrought upon her tomb. Claude, we need scarcely add, was the eldest daughter of Louis XII. and Anne of Brittany. Married to François, then Duke de Valois, when she was barely fifteen, she brought him as a dowry Brittany, and the title to the duchy of Milan. On the present occasion she was attired in cloth of gold tissue, raised with pearls of damask silver, and was coiffed in a diamond-shaped head-dress, ornamented with jewels.

The ancient dame whom we have mentioned as seated near her was Anne of France, Duchess de Bourbon-Beaujeu, eldest daughter of Louis XI. A woman of masculine character and understanding, the Dame de Beaujeu, as she was called, possessed many of her sagacious father's qualities, great shrewdness and tenacity of purpose. She had governed the kingdom with firmness and ability during the youth of her brother, Charles VIII., and long maintained her sway, but her credit declined under. Louis XII., and when François I. mounted the throne the power she had once possessed fell entirely into the hands of the Duchess d'Angoulême.

At no time had Anne de France been handsome, and perhaps her features were more agreeable in old age than in youth. Her countenance was hard, strongly marked, and entirely devoid of feminine expression. Always meagre of person, she became thinner and more rigid as she advanced in life. Her manner was cold and severe, but her deportment did not lack dignity.

At the time when we discover her, the Dame de Beaujeu seemed utterly prostrated by illness. Her features were wasted and haggard, and all her movements evinced extreme debility. She was attired in black velvet, richly trimmed with sable. Around her throat she wore a gorget, and her venerable locks were partially concealed by a black velvet hood. She had been brought in a litter to the palace, and had to be carried up to the salle de Saint Louis. Her physician, Mathieu Bernard, accompanied her, and was now standing at a little distance, describing her precarious condition to Cornelius Agrippa.

"Is it possible her grace can have journeyed hither from Paris, doctor?" inquired Agrippa.

"She heard that the Constable de Bourbon had been summoned to Fontainebleau by the king, and insisted upon coming hither," replied Mathieu Bernard. "All my efforts to dissuade her grace were vain."

"She will scarce get back again," replied Agrippa.

Making a profound obeisance to Claude, Bourbon knelt reverentially to his mother-in-law, and kissed her withered hand. The old duchess immediately raised him, and embraced him tenderly.

"Your looks bespeak trouble, my son," she said, regarding him anxiously. "Tell me what has happened?"

Bourbon relieved his bursting heart by a full description of his interview with the Duchess d'Angoulême, and the quarrel that had ensued between him and the king. Both Claude and the old duchess listened to his narration with profound interest. At its close, the queen said:

"I sympathise with you deeply, prince, but do not let the injuries you have received make you swerve from your loyalty to the king."

"Justice must and shall be done you, Charles," cried the Dame de Beaujeu. "I will go to the Duchess d'Angoulême at once. Your arm, Charles – give me your arm."

"You are not equal to the effort, madame," said the Constable.

"If it costs me my life, I will see her," cried the resolute old duchess. And she took a few steps, but her strength then utterly failed her, and she would have fallen but for the Constable's support.

Her physician and Cornelius Agrippa, who had been anxiously watching her, flew to her assistance.

"Oh! that; I had but one hour left of my former strength! I should die content," she groaned.

"Drink of this, madame," said Cornelius Agrippa, offering her a phial. "It is a sovereign elixir, and will restore you."

But she had not strength to take the phial, and was evidently sinking.

Bourbon, however, placed the elixir to her lips, and made her swallow a few drops. The effect was instantaneous and almost magical. New strength seemed imparted to her limbs, the hue of health returned to her cadaverous cheeks, and she was able to stand without support.

"You have given me new life," she said to Agrippa.

"Waste not a moment of it, madame," he replied. "It may not be of long duration."

Just then, the great folding-doors at the end of the hall were thrown open, and the king, accompanied by the Duchess d'Angoulême and Bonnivet, entered the salon. Behind them came a crowd of courtiers, amongst whom were Montmorency, Saint-Vallier, and René de Bretagne.

"I have my wish. She is here!" cried the old duchess.

On the entrance of the king, Claude advanced to meet him, and the Dame de Beaujeu followed closely behind her, marching with the firmness and majesty of former years. As he beheld her move along in this way, Mathieu Bernard observed to Agrippa:

"You have performed a miracle."

"I have but restored the vital energies for a moment," replied the other. "It is the last flash of the expiring taper."

The royal party met in the centre of the salon. Bourbon had followed his mother-in-law, and Saint-Vallier and René came over and stationed themselves beside him.

"I am sorry to learn, sire," said Claude, "that our cousin, the Constable de Bourbon, has incurred your displeasure. Let me intercede for him with your majesty."

"It is true that the Duke dc Bourbon has deeply offended me," said the king. "But it is not too late for his restoration to favour."

"You hear that, prince," said Claude to the Constable. "All may yet be well."

"Sire," interposed the Dame de Beaujeu, "I ask for justice to my son-in-law, the Duke de Bourbon. Has he not served you faithfully? Has he not brought you men and treasure? Has he not bled for you in the field? And how has he been rewarded? By slights, by the withdrawal of his pensions, by the spoliation of his property, by disgrace, by dishonour. Sire, wrongs like these are enough to make a traitor of the noblest and most loyal heart in France."

"No wrong, madame, has been done to the Constable de Bourbon," rejoined the king. "But, if I am not misinformed, he has already played the traitor."

Bourbon looked sternly at the king, but took no other notice of the insinuation.

"Believe it not, sire," said the Dame de Beaujeu. "Whoso has told you that has spoken falsely," she added, glancing at the Duchess d'Angoulême. "Charles de Bourbon is no traitor. But goad him not to desperation by wrongs greater than any man can tamely endure."

"Peace, madame. You trouble the king," said the Duchess d'Angoulême.

"What!" exclaimed the Dame de Beaujeu, regarding her with unutterable scorn. "Is Anne of France, daughter of Louis XI., the wisest and the greatest monarch that ever sat on the throne, to hold her peace at the bidding of Louise de Savoie? But I will *not* be silent. I will tell the king, your son, that he has done a flagrant act of injustice in aiding you to avenge yourself upon the Duke de Bourbon. All shall know the cause of your animosity."

"I will hear no more," cried François, impatiently.

"Listen to me, sire, I beseech you," said Queen Claude. "You have done Bourbon grievous wrong. Make him some amends. You know I rarely interfere with your proceedings, but in this case I cannot refrain. I would not have you commit injustice."

"Do you also tax me with injustice?" said the king, frowning.

"I have said it, sire," she replied.

"I should be wanting in duty to your majesty if I remained silent," said Montmorency. "In my opinion, Bourbon has been unjustly treated."

"You, too, against me, marshal?" cried the king.

"I will answer for Bourbon's loyalty with my head, sire," said Saint-Vallier.

"And so will I," added René de Bretagne.

"I take you at your word, messieurs," replied François. "Charles de Bourbon, you are free to depart."

"Sire, you do wrong in granting this permission," sad the Duchess d'Angoulême.

"Beware, madame," said the Dame de Beaujeu, stepping towards her. And clutching her hand, she whispered, "Interfere, and I will proclaim your infamy to all around."

Bourbon tarried not a moment. With a haughty obeisance, and with a look of ill-disguised menace at the king, he quitted the salon, followed by Saint-Vallier and René.

This time he experienced no hindrance from the guard, but passing through the vestibule, and descending the great horse-shoe staircase, he mounted his steed, and rode off with his escort.

As Cornelius Agrippa had predicted, the Dame do Beaujeu expired on her litter on the way back to Paris.

END OF THE FIRST BOOK

BOOK II. – THE FLIGHT

I. THE SECRET TREATY

At the ancient Château of Moulins, the abode of his illustrious ancestors, the Constable de Bourbon dwelt in princely state, maintaining a vast number of retainers, holding a court little inferior in splendour to that of the king, and exercising all the privileges of a powerful feudal suzerain. A grand and picturesque-looking structure was the château, and from its proud position dominated the town, and the rich vine-covered district around it. Not two leagues from Moulins was the abbey of Souvigny, a venerable Gothic pile, which was to the Dukes of Bourbon what Saint Denis was to the Kings of France – a mausoleum.

On his return from Fontainebleau to Moulins, Bourbon allowed no indication to appear from his manner that he was disturbed by the quarrel that had taken place between him and the king, though those in his confidence knew that he meditated revenge, and was making preparations for revolt.

Ere a week had elapsed, he received information through a trusty messenger that the Comte de Beaurain, the ambassador of the Emperor, and Sir John Russell, the envoy of Henry VIII., had arrived at Bourg, in Bresse, where they proposed to await a communication from the Constable. The moment had now arrived when it became necessary for Bourbon to decide whether he would remain faithful to his sovereign, and bear tamely all the injuries he had received, or cast off his allegiance to François, and enter into a league with that monarch's enemies. The Constable was not long in arriving at a determination to adopt the latter course.

As it might excite the king's suspicions if he went to Bourg, and as it would be equally dangerous if the ambassadors attempted to come to Moulins, Bourbon appointed a meeting with them at Montbrison, the capital of the Haut-Forez, the most mountainous and inaccessible portion of his domains.

Under the pretext of a pilgrimage to Notre-Dame du Buy, he forthwith set out for the Chateau de Montbrison, accompanied by a great number of adherents on whose zeal and attachment he could rely, and who were prepared to second his projects, and take up arms in his cause. Chief among these were Saint-Vallier and René de Bretagne. Bourbon was also attended by his confidant, Philibert de Saint-Romain, Seigneur de Lurcy, the Seigneur de Pomperant, his two chamberlains, his two maîtres d'hôtel, Antoine d'Espinat, lieutenant of his company of men-at-arms, the Bishops of Puy and Autun, both of whom had warmly embraced his cause, and a crowd of young seigneurs from the Bourbonnais, Auvergne, Forez, and Beaujolais.

On the third night after his arrival at Montbrison, while he was seated at supper with his retainers in the great banqueting-hall of the château, two strangers, who described themselves as merchants of Lyons, who were travelling to Clermont, claimed his hospitality.

The Constable at once gave them welcome, and assigned them seats at the lower table. Their attire accorded with the account they gave of themselves, but their bearing proclaimed them persons of rank, and Bourbon easily detected in one of them, a handsome, dark-complexioned man, with fine eyes and a very intelligent countenance, the Seigneur de Beaurain; while, though he was wholly unacquainted with the other – a well-made, but somewhat robust personage, with a bright fresh colour and light-brown locks – he judged him to be Sir John Russell, and he was right in the conjecture.

At the close of the meal, the Constable expressed a desire to converse with his new guests, and requested them to follow him to his private cabinet.

As soon as the door was closed, all disguise was thrown aside, and Bourbon cordially welcomed Beaurain, and expressed the highest satisfaction at beholding the English envoy.

"I regret that I could not receive you in a manner befitting your rank, messeigneurs," he said. "I do not think I have any spies amid my household, but it is necessary to be cautious. And now be seated, I pray you, and let us address ourselves to the matter in hand."

"First, let me express the indignation which my royal master the Emperor feels at the infamous treatment experienced by your highness from the King of France," said Beaurain – "treatment as injudicious as unworthy, and which fully justifies any reprisals you may make."

"I have also to convey to your highness the expression of similar sentiments from my sovereign, King Henry VIII.," added Sir John Russell. "His majesty is highly indignant."

"I have not merely my own private wrongs to redress, messeigneurs," replied Bourbon, "but those of my country, which is suffering from bad government and oppression, and half ruined by a luxurious monarch, who ravages the people to enrich his mistresses and favourites. François de Valois is unworthy to occupy the throne of France."

"He shall not occupy it long," replied Beaurain, with a significant smile. "But before proceeding further, let me offer my credentials to your highness. Here is a letter from the Emperor," he added, delivering a despatch to the Constable.

Bourbon took it, broke the seal, and read as follows:

"Cousin, – I send you the Sieur de Beaurain, my second chamberlain. Believe him as you would believe me, and doing so you will find me always your good cousin and friend,

"Charles."

"I am furnished by my august sovereign, King Henry VIII., with full powers to treat with your highness, as this letter will prove," said Sir John Russell, likewise delivering a despatch to the Constable.

"Enough, messires," observed Bourbon, after he had perused the second despatch, which was couched in nearly similar terms to the first. "These letters, though brief, are all I could desire."

"It is scarcely necessary for me to observe to your highness," said Beaurain, "that the Emperor my master, and his Majesty the King of England, are acting conjointly in this matter. As you are aware, they have entered into a league offensive and defensive against France, and in this league they propose to include your highness."

"I am ready to engage in war against François I.," remarked Bourbon; "but, whatever may be the issue of the contest, I cannot consent to recognise Henry VIII. as King of France."

"Such recognition will not be required of your highness," observed Sir John Russell. "France will exist no longer. The realm will be divided between the three allies. The north will fall to the share of my royal master. The centre of the kingdom will be yours. The south will appertain to the Emperor."

"The partition can be discussed hereafter," rejoined Beaurain. "The kingdom must be conquered ere it can be divided. It is proposed that the invasion shall take place in this manner. The Emperor will penetrate France from Narbonne with eighteen thousand Spaniards, ten thousand German lanz-knechts, two thousand men of arms, and four thousand lances. Simultaneously with this attack, Henry VIII. will place fifteen thousand archers and five hundred horsemen in Picardy, and this force will be further augmented by six thousand men from the Low Countries. The invasion will take place when François is occupied with the expedition to Italy. Not till ten days after the kingdom has been attacked at either extremity by Spain and England shall your highness raise the standard of rebellion, for fear of misadventure. At the expiration of that time you shall declare yourself. You will be aided by ten thousand lanz-knechts, enrolled for you in Germany, who will enter France through Bresse."

"I approve the plan," said Bourbon. "But by whom are the lanz-knechts to be paid?"

"The Emperor and his Majesty King Henry VIII. engage to furnish your highness with two hundred thousand crowns for their payment," returned Beaurain. "And the two monarchs further

engage to sustain your highness against all your enemies, and to conclude no truce or treaty in which you are not comprehended."

"I am content," observed Bourbon.

"I trust your highness will be well satisfied with what I have further to propose," pursued Beaurain. "In order to prove the high esteem in which he holds you, the Emperor has commissioned me to offer you in marriage his sister, the widowed Queen of Portugal, with a dower of two hundred thousand crowns, without counting her own rental of twenty thousand crowns, besides jewels for five or six hundred thousand more. Or, if your highness prefer the Emperor's younger sister, the Infanta Catalina, you may have her, with a like dower. All his Imperial Majesty requires in return is, that you shall unite yourself with him against all other persons, without exception."

"I choose the fair Queen of Portugal," replied Bourbon; "and I will give her as a dowry the Beaujolais, which produces twenty thousand crowns of revenue. I take you both to witness," he added, "that I now renounce my fealty to François I. I cast off my allegiance to that false and perfidious king, and transfer it to the Emperor Charles V."

"We attest your highness's renunciation," said both envoys, solemnly.

"And I accept your allegiance in the name of the Emperor," added Beaurain, with a look of satisfaction.

"Nothing now remains but to prepare the treaty," said Bourbon to the Imperial envoy.

Beaurain did not require a second order. Writing materials were on the table beside him, and he rapidly performed his task. The document having been approved by Bourbon and Sir John Russell, two copies were made of it, and when all had been duly signed, as well by the Constable as by the envoys, each retaining a copy, Beaurain observed, with a smile, "Your highness is now pledged to us."

"I am bound to revolt and vengeance," replied Bourbon, "and my kingly allies will aid me in my work. Hitherto, my device has been —*Spes*. Henceforth," he added, unsheathing his sword, and kissing the blade, "it shall be – '*Omnis spes in ferro est*.'"

Perfectly satisfied, the envoys were about to withdraw, when Bourbon detained them.

"Stay a moment, messeigneurs," he said. "I must send a messenger to the Emperor."

With this he sat down and wrote a letter, and, having sealed it, he summoned the Sieur de Bruzon, a gentleman entirely in his confidence, and said to him:

"The Seigneur de Beaurain, whom I here present to you, comes as an ambassador from the Emperor, to offer me the Queen of Portugal in marriage. You will accompany him on his return, and will deliver this letter into the hands of his Imperial Majesty, saying that I recommend myself very humbly to his good grace, and thank him heartily for the signal honour he has shown me in offering me his sister. Add, that he will ever find me his good brother and friend. Say this to him."

"I shall not fail," replied Bruzon.

"Since our errand is completed, we will take leave of your highness," said Beaurain. "We shall start two hours before daybreak, and make the best of our way back to Bourg. Immediately on my arrival there I will despatch a courier to the Arch-Duke Ferdinand, enjoining him, in the Emperor's name, to enrol the ten thousand lanz-knechts who are to be placed under your highness's command. This done, I shall set out for Genoa, and embark thence for Spain."

"And I shall make my way as speedily as may be for England," said Sir John Russell.

"Commend me heartily to your royal master," said the Constable, "and remind him of what passed between us at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Farewell, messeigneurs! Heaven speed you on your journey! A guard shall attend you over the mountains of Forez. See that men are in readiness, Bruzon."

"We thank your highness," said Beaurain. "Heaven prosper the cause in which you have embarked!"

The two envoys then quitted the cabinet, attended by Bruzon.

“Can I hope that Heaven will prosper the cause of treason and rebellion?” exclaimed Bourbon, as soon as he was left alone. “But reflection comes too late. The step is taken. I must on.”

At this moment the door opened, and the Comte de Saint-Vallier entered the cabinet.

II. HOW SAINT-VALLIER REMONSTRATED WITH THE CONSTABLE

Do I disturb you?" said Saint-Vallier. "I would fain have a few words with you in reference to those two merchants from Lyons, who have been so long closeted with you. They are not what they pretend to be."

"You are right, cousin," replied the Constable. "I am glad you are come. I desire to unbosom myself to you of a secret that weighs upon my soul. You know that the affection I bear for you is as great as that which I formerly entertained for my brother, François de Bourbon, Duke de Châtelleraut, who fell by my side at Marignan. I can entirely confide in you. But the secret I am about to disclose is of vast importance, and concerns others besides myself. Swear, therefore, on this fragment of the true cross," he added, holding towards him a reliquary whieh hung by a gold chain from his neek – "swear upon this, know that the affection I bear for you is as great as that which I formerly entertained for my brother, François de Bourbon, Duke de Châtelleraut, who fell by my side at Marignan. I can entirely confide in you. But the secret I am about to disclose is of vast importance, and concerns others besides myself. Swear, therefore, on this fragment of the true cross," he added, holding towards him a reliquary whieh hung by a gold ehain from his neek – "swear upon this that you will never reveal what I am about to impart."

Saint-Vallier having taken the oath, the Constable proceeded to disclose all that had taken place between him and the two envoys. Saint-Vallier listened in silence, but his countenance showed he was deeply distressed by the recital.

When Bourbon had ended, he said:

"Monseigneur, you have declared that you love me as the brother you bewail. As that brother would have spoken, had he been living, I will now speak to you. The Duke de Châtelleraut followed you in your glorious career, but he would not have followed you in the career in which you are about to embark. He would never have been a traitor and a rebel."

"By Saint Paul! he would not have endured the wrongs I have endured, and which have made me what I am," rejoined the Constable.

"I grant you have had great wrongs," rejoined Saint-Vallier; "but this is not the way to avenge them. You are about to destroy yourself or your country. Weigh well what I say. If the plot is discovered, your doom is certain, and you will die with infamy. If the design succeeds, you will aid the enemies of your country, to whom your name has been hitherto redoubtable, and who seek you, not because they sympathise with your wrongs, but because they believe you can serve them. But pause, I implore you, before the fatal step be irrevocably taken. Pause before you declare yourself a rebel. The king may deprive you of your possessions, but he cannot deprive you of your renown, which ought to be dearer to you than wealth and power. No one can rob you of your glory but yourself. Would you incur the scorn and reproach of the haughty nobles who have made you their model? Would you desert that youthful chivalry who have striven to emulate your valour, and whom you have led on to conquest? Would you turn your arms against those soldiers of whom you have so long been the hero and the idol? Will not your breast be torn with anguish and remorse as you listen to the cries of desolated France, while she shrieks in your ears, 'Bourbon was the defender of his country, and has become its scourge'?"

Bourbon was much moved at this appeal, and Saint-Vallier believed he had made the desired impression upon him, as the Constable remained for some time absorbed in thought. But he was mistaken, for Bourbon suddenly exclaimed, "I cannot renounce my project. It is too late."

"No, it is not too late," rejoined Saint-Vallier. "The envoys have not departed. Send for them. Reclaim the treaty."

At this moment Bruzon entered the cabinet.

"Highness, a messenger has just arrived from the king," he said. "It is the Seigneur Perot de Warthy, and from what I gather he brings good tidings."

"He can scarce bring good tidings from the king; but I will see him," replied the Constable.

Following Bruzon to the door, Saint-Vallier said to him, in a low tone,

"Bid those two merchants from Lyons come hither. His highness desires further speech with them."

A few moments afterwards, the Seigneur Perot de Warthy, a gallant-looking young cavalier, clad in a rich riding-dress, though somewhat travel-stained, was ushered into the cabinet by Bruzon. Close behind them followed the two envoys, whose reappearance excited Bourbon's surprise, though he made no remark.

"What is your errand, Seigneur de Warthy?" demanded the Constable of the messenger.

"I bring this despatch for your highness," replied Warthy. "The king is about to set out on the expedition to Italy – "

"And he has summoned me to attend him – ha?" interrupted Bourbon.

"No, prince," replied Warthy. "His majesty has been pleased to appoint you lieutenant-general of the kingdom, to regulate, in conjunction with the Duchess d'Angoulême, all affairs of state during his absence."

"Lieutenant-general of the kingdom!" exclaimed Bourbon, astonished. "Has his majesty bestowed that appointment upon me? I expected a far different message."

"It is as I have stated to your highness," said Warthy. "There you will find the brevet."

"The king relents towards you, cousin," whispered Saint-Vallier. "He is about to restore you to favour. All that has been done has been merely to try you."

"He has not abandoned the hope of reconciling me to the duchess," rejoined Bourbon, in the same tone. "This is her handiwork. Seigneur Perot de Warthy," he added, turning to him, "I must pray you accept this ring," taking one from his finger and presenting it to him. "I will charge you with my thanks to the king to-morrow. Let all hospitality be shown him," he added to Bruzon, who bowed and withdrew with the messenger.

"Now is the moment," whispered Saint-Vallier. "The envoys are here. Reclaim the treaty."

"Has your highness anything further to say to us?" demanded Beaurain, uneasily.

"No," replied Bourbon, approaching him. "The king has tried to lure me back in vain. I adhere to my resolution. Good night, messeigneurs."

The two envoys bowed and retired.

"He is lost!" exclaimed Saint-Vallier.

III. SHOWING HOW THE PLOT PROGRESSED

Long before daylight, the two envoys, accompanied by Bruzon and a guard, quitted the Château de Montbrison. On the same day, at a later hour, Perot de Warthy set out on his return to the Palais des Tournelles.

As soon as the king's messenger had departed, Bourbon held a private council in his cabinet, at which were present the Bishops of Puy and Autun, Aymard de Prie, Seigneur de Montpoupon, La Clayette, and Saint-Sa-phorin, two brave and experienced captains, who had served under him in the Milanese, and the Seigneur de Lurcy. Having bound them to secresy, he acquainted them with the treaty he had entered into with the Emperor and the King of England. None of his auditors attempted to dissuade him from the design, but, on the contrary, all approved of it, and agreed to lend their aid in its furtherance.

"It behoves your highness to exercise the utmost caution in making your preparations," said Saint-Saphorin.

"Perot de Warthy, who has just left, has been asking many questions concerning your movements, and he appeared to have some suspicion of the real character of the two pretended Lyons merchants."

"Be assured I will act with all due caution," said the Constable. "I was on my guard with Warthy, as I believe him to be a spy. But it is absolutely necessary to ascertain how many partisans I can count upon, and how many men I can raise."

"When so many have to be trusted, some rumours of the plot are sure to reach the ears of the king," observed the Bishop de Puy, "I would advise your highness to wait till his majesty has set out for Italy. It will be time enough to levy your troops when he has crossed the Alps, and cannot return."

"No, no; at all hazards I must prepare," replied Bourbon, impatiently. "You, my lord bishop, have professed your readiness to serve me. I shall now put your zeal to the test, by charging you with a mission to my uncle, the Duke de Savoie, urging him to declare himself in my favour as soon as the rebellion shall occur, and to prepare for that event."

"I will undertake the mission," replied the bishop. "But it is not devoid of danger. If I am taken, my sacred character will not protect me from the king's vengeance."

"You have nothing to fear," said Bourbon. "No letters shall betray your purpose. Tell the Duke de Savoie that I can count upon two thousand gentlemen who have pledged themselves to stand by me in any event, and to bring retainers with them. Tell him also that I can make sure of four thousand fantassins in the Pays de Vaud and Faucigny. Am I not right, captain?" he added, turning to Saint-Saphorin.

"I will answer for the men," replied the other.

"And I will undertake to raise as many more in the Beaujolais and the principality of Dombes," said La "Clayette.

"I will undertake to hold Dijon," said Aymard de Prie. "I am in command of the garrison, and will introduce a thousand men into the city."

"Your highness will have men enough, I doubt not," said the Bishop of Autun. "Half France will flock to your standard when it is once displayed. But do not neglect precautionary measures in the interim. If you should be betrayed, and fall into the king's hands, he will show you no mercy."

"I am fully aware of the risk I run, my lord bishop," replied Bourbon; "and, for fear of mishap, I will fortify my two strongholds of Chantelle and Carlat, and furnish them with men and provisions, so as to secure a safe retreat."

"Has your highness any commission for me?" inquired the Seigneur de Lurcy.

"Yes, an important one, which I know you will execute to my satisfaction," replied the Constable. "You shall despatch a messenger to Jacques de Matignon and Jacques d'Argouges, two

young Norman seigneurs, who are attached to me, appointing a meeting with them at Vendôme. They will attend the rendezvous, I doubt not, and you will then reveal the plot to them, and engage them to facilitate the disembarkation of the English, and the occupation of the province by the Duke of Suffolk."

"Think you they can be trusted?" said Lurcy.

"Most assuredly," replied Bourbon. "Tempt them with the offer of the government of Normandy. With that inducement they will not hesitate."

"Your highness's instructions shall be carefully fulfilled," replied Lurcy.

"Do you propose to remain here till the outbreak, prince?" inquired the Bishop of Autun.

"No," replied Bourbon. "I shall return forthwith to Moulins, and, in order to avoid a summons to join the king, I shall feign illness, and remain secluded till his majesty has set out for Italy."

"You will do well," observed the bishop. "Such a course will disarm suspicion."

Next morning it was reported throughout the château that the Constable had been seized with fever. His physicians declared that the air of Montbrison disagreed with him, and advised his return to Moulins, as soon as he was able to bear the journey. Before complying with the recommendation, Bourbon despatched a messenger to François, who was then staying at the palace of the Tournelles, excusing himself on the plea of severe indisposition from repairing to Paris.

Meantime, the Bishop de Puy set out on his mission to the Duke de Savoie, Aymard de Prie proceeded with his troops to Dijon, and Lurcy was on his way to keep the rendezvous he had appointed with Matignon and D'Argouges at Vendôme.

Thus it will be seen that some little progress had been made in the plot.

IV. THE COMTE DE MAULEVRIER

By the time the Constable had returned to the Château de Moulins, François had completed his preparations for the war in Italy. Bonnivet, at the head of a large force, had already crossed the Alps, and Lautrec and Lescun had been sent to defend the frontiers from the Spaniards.

Having paid a visit to the cathedral of Saint Denis, for the purpose of solemnly invoking the aid of the patron saint of France, and offered up his devotions in the Sainte Chapelle; having also publicly appointed his mother Regent of the kingdom during his absence, he set out with a large attendance, comprising the flower of the French chivalry.

His march rather resembled a journey of pleasure than a warlike expedition, inasmuch as he was accompanied by the Comtesse de Chateaubriand and several other beautiful dames. The royal cortège was preceded by the Grand-Master of France at the head of two thousand lansquenets, and followed by the Duke de Longueville, with a large troop of horse.

Proceeding by easy stages, François had reached Saint-Pierre-le-Moutier, which was within half a day's journey of the Château de Moulins, and was passing the evening festively, as was his wont, when he was disturbed by the sudden arrival of Louis de Brézé, Comte de Maulévrier, grand seneşchal and lieutenant-general of Normandy, whom we have already mentioned as the husband of the beautiful Diane de Poitiers, daughter of the Comte de Saint-Vallier.

François at once granted him the private interview he desired, and, as soon as they were alone, Maulévrier said, "Sire, prepare yourself for bad tidings. What I have to tell you I fear will arrest your expedition to Italy. I come to warn your majesty of a most formidable conspiracy, the object of which is to deprive you of your kingdom, and perhaps of your life. Fortunately, the discovery has been made before the mine could be sprung. Fortunately, also, for the purposes of justice, the chief contriver of the plot is in your majesty's power."

"There is only one person in the kingdom who could contrive such a plot," replied the king. "But I do not think the Constable de Bourbon capable of a crime so heinous."

"The Constable de Bourbon is guilty of the blackest treason, sire," replied Maulévrier. "He has allied himself to the Emperor and to the King of England, and while an invasion is made upon your kingdom by those two sovereigns, he designs to break out into revolt. This is no idle accusation, sire. I will give proofs of the truth of what I assert. Two young Norman seigneurs of high honour and distinction, Matignon and D'Argouges, with whose names your majesty must be familiar, met Bourbon's confidential agent, Lurcy, by appointment at Vendôme. At this meeting Lurcy disclosed to them the whole conspiracy, and offered them the government of Normandy and other high posts, on the condition that they should assist the disembarkation of the English on our coasts. The treasonable offer filled the two loyal gentlemen with horror, and they indignantly rejected it, but, as they had been sworn to secresy, they could not reveal it. However, they confessed the conspiracy to the Bishop of Lisieux, who, appalled at its enormity, at once made it known to me, and I have not lost a moment in warning your majesty of the danger with which you and your loyal subjects are threatened. Heaven be praised, you have hitherto escaped!"

Astounded by this terrible communication, to which he would willingly have refused credit, the king remained for some time buried in reflection. At length he said:

"Comte de Maulévrier, I charge you not to let fall a word in regard to this conspiracy. I will give Bourbon a last chance. I will see him to-morrow at the Chateau de Moulins."

Maulévrier would have remonstrated, but perceiving that the king was resolved, he said no more.

François, however, did not neglect needful precautions. Without assigning any reason for the step, he immediately despatched an order to the grand-master, who was a day in advance of the royal

cavalcade, enjoining him to return at once, and he directed the Duke de Longueville to scour the country round with his cavalry.

Next day the king rode on to Moulins, where he found the grand-master awaiting him with the two thousand lansquenets. With this force, and with the troop of the Duke de Longueville, François felt no apprehension of outbreak.

After ordering the town to be invested at all points, he entered the château with a numerous guard, and demanded the keys, which were at once delivered to him by Philippe des Escures, Bourbon's chamberlain. François then dismounted, and said, in an angry tone, "Why is not the Lord Constable here to welcome me? Bid him come to me at once."

"Sire," replied the chamberlain, "the Constable is full of grief that he cannot receive your majesty in person. He is confined to his chamber by severe illness, and cannot stir forth without imperilling his life."

"Ha!" exclaimed the king, with an incredulous look. "I may be able to find a more efficacious remedy for his illness than his physicians have employed. Take me to his chamber."

"Let me go with you, I pray you, sire?" said Maulévrier, who was standing near the king.

François, however, declined, and entered the château. Conducted by the chamberlain, whose looks proclaimed his alarm, he then proceeded to the duke's chamber.

V. WHAT PASSED IN THE SICK MAN'S CHAMBER

The king was ushered into the sick man's chamber. It was large and gloomy, wainscoted with oak as black as ebony, and the panels were adorned with portraits of the Constable's illustrious ancestors, commencing with Robert, Comte de Clermont, sixth son of Saint Louis, and Beatrix de Bourgogne, daughter of John de Bourgogne, and heiress of Bourbon-l'Archambaud, from whom the house of Bourbon derived its name, and concluding with the father of the Constable, Gilbert de Montpensier, slain at Pozzuoli in the war against Naples by Charles VIII., and Clara de Gonzaga, the Constable's mother, a princess remarkable for her beauty.

On a couch, at the farther end of this sombre apartment, lay the sick man, wrapped in a loose gown of quilted silk, trimmed with sable. He had a black taffeta cap on his head, and a furred velvet mantle was thrown over his knees. Beside him, on a table placed within reach, stood a crystal flagon containing a dark-coloured liquid, and several small phials. The only person with him at the moment was his principal physician, Jean de l'Hôpital.

On the entrance of the king, who was ceremoniously announced by the chamberlain, Bourbon, aided by his physician, arose, and bowing, thanked his majesty for his gracious visit.

"I am sorry to find you so unwell, cousin," replied the king, regarding him as closely as the gloom of the chamber would permit, and coming to the conclusion that his illness was simulated.

Bourbon bore the scrutiny without embarrassment.

"The saints be praised that your majesty has come at a time when the fit has just left me," he said, "and when I am secure from the attack lor a few hours. But I am greatly prostrated," he added, feebly – "greatly prostrated."

The king bade him be seated, adding, that he desired to confer with him in private, whereupon Bourbon signed to his attendants to withdraw.

Before quitting the chamber, Jean de l'Hôpital observed, in an undertone to the king, "His highness has been dangerously ill, sire, and is not yet out of danger."

Then making an obeisance, he retired.

The chamberlain having placed a chair for the king near Bourbon's couch, likewise bowed and withdrew.

After glancing round to make sure they were quite alone, François said,

"I will deal plainly with you, cousin. Some disclosures have been made to me respecting your practices which I would willingly not believe, and before taking any steps to ascertain the truth of the reports, I have resolved to give you an opportunity of explanation."

"My enemies have been at work, I perceive, sire," said Bourbon, without manifesting the slightest uneasiness. "What has been told your majesty?"

"I have been informed," replied François, "that, forgetful of your allegiance to me, you have entered into a treasonable league with my enemies the Emperor and Henry VIII. This is what I have been told, cousin, but, as I have said, I am unwilling to believe it."

"Sire," replied Bourbon, "you have not been misinformed. Overtures have been made me by the Emperor and the King of England, who thought, not unnaturally, that the treatment I have experienced from your majesty must have deeply dissatisfied me."

"They thought you were prepared to become a traitor," cried François. "Foi de gentilhomme! I scarcely expected you to make so frank an avowal. They knew you to be ready to revolt – ha!"

"They knew I had endured wrongs enough to make me a rebel," rejoined Bourbon. "But they were mistaken, sire – they were mistaken."

"Then you rejected the offers?" said the king.

"I still indulged hopes that your majesty would render me justice."

"Justice you shall have, cousin – strict justice," rejoined the king. "Now listen to me. I suspect – nay, I am certain – that you are engaged in a conspiracy against me, and against the state. The two young Norman seigneurs, Matignon and D'Argouges, have disclosed the treasonable proposition made to them on your part by Lurcy. You look confounded, as well you may. You see I have ample proof of your guilt, but I can obtain plenty more by arresting all your principal adherents who are now assembled in this château. Not one of them can escape me."

"Be not too sure of that, sire," said Bourbon.

"You fancy you can protect them," rejoined the king. "Learn that I am master of your castle. Its courts are filled with my archers – its walls are surrounded by my troops – its keys are in my possession. I have only to give the word to cause your arrest."

"Your majesty will never give that word," rejoined Bourbon, calmly.

"Wherefore not?" cried François, striding towards the door, as if with the design of putting his threat into execution. "What ho, there! – who waits?"

But the door was shut, and no one answered the summons, though the king repeated it still more lustily.

"What means this?" he cried, glancing furiously at Bourbon, who had risen from his couch, and thrown off his loose robe, showing that he was armed..

"It means, sire," replied the Constable, "that the door will not be opened save at my order. Your majesty may be assured," he added, with stern significance, "that those who enter this chamber will not arrest *me*."

"Ha, traitor! do you mean me mischief?" exclaimed the king.

"Your majesty has come hither alone. I did not invite you. But you are perfectly safe, provided you pledge your royal word that no arrests shall be made."

François hesitated for a moment, and then returned his half-drawn sword to the scabbard.

"Let us understand each other, Bourbon," he said. "I had no design to proceed to extremities with you. Had it been so, I should have ordered your immediate arrest on my arrival at the château. My wish, as you must have perceived, was to confer amicably with you. I do not desire your destruction – on the contrary, I am well disposed towards you – ay, well disposed. Abandon your fatal design – prove to me that you are faithful and loyal as heretofore, and you shall find me forgiving and generous. Be true to your sovereign, and we will be true to you. Whatever may be the decree of the Parliament, you shall keep your possessions. The utmost wish of your soaring ambition shall be gratified. You shall accompany me to Italy, and shall share with me the command of the army. Will this content you?"

"Sire, it is far more than I could expect," replied Bourbon. "I thought I had entirely forfeited your favour.",

"Ingrate! – how could you think so, when I but lately appointed you lieutenant-general of the kingdom? That appointment ought to have convinced you that, in spite of our misunderstanding, I still had the greatest regard for you. I know your merits as a leader, and am certain you will add to your renown in this campaign. You shall help me to re-conquer the Milanese, as you helped me at Marignan to win it."

"I hope to convince your majesty that I am worthy of the distinguished honour you propose to confer upon me," said Bourbon.

"The appointment shall be announced at once, and will set at rest all rumours to your disadvantage," said François. "To-morrow you shall set out with me for Lyons."

"Alas! sire, I am utterly unable to travel in my present state. I could not even enter a litter. My physicians will tell you so."

"'Tis a strange disorder that afflicts you, cousin," observed François, with an incredulous look. "You appear strong enough for service in the field."

"You must not judge me by my looks, sire. When the fit seizes me, I am utterly prostrated. But I shall be better in a few days."

“You think so?” cried the king. “Well, then, I will wait for you at Lyons.”

“I would not have your majesty delay the expedition on my account. As soon as I am able to move, I will follow you to Italy.”

“No, no, I will not start without you,” rejoined the king, suspiciously. “You shall join me at Lyons as speedily as you can.”

At this moment a side-door was opened, and a young dame, richly attired, and of surpassing beauty, entered the chamber.

VI. DIANE DE POITIERS

On seeing the king, she would have instantly retreated, but he commanded her to stay.

"Do not let my presence alarm you, fair lady," he said. "And do not suppose you interrupt me, for I have finished my conference with the Lord Constable."

The young dame, who seemed much embarrassed, made a profound obeisance, but did not advance. As we have said, she was exquisitely beautiful. Her features might have been modelled by Praxiteles, and her figure was tall and admirably proportioned. She was attired in green velvet, embroidered with flowers of damask, gold, and pearls, with the sleeves puffed and quilted, and her head-dress, which was very becomingly fashioned, was ornamented with pearls and other precious stones.

"I am trying to recal your features, fair lady," said the king, approaching her, and regarding her with undisguised admiration, "but I do not think I can have seen you before. Such a lovely face as yours – such lustrous eyes – and such a form – must have made a lasting impression upon me. Yet you must have been at court."

"No, sire, my father, the Comte de Saint-Vallier, never took me to court," she replied.

"How?" exclaimed François, surprised. "Are you the charming Diane de Poitiers, who, by bestowing your hand upon the Comte de Maulévrier, have made him the most enviable of mortals?"

"It is my misfortune, sire, to be the wife of the Comte de Maulévrier," she replied.

"Your misfortune! ha!" exclaimed the king. "Are you aware that your husband is here?"

"Here, sire?" exclaimed Diane, uneasily.

"Nay, be not alarmed," replied François, smiling. "He has not come for the purpose of taking you back to the Château de Brézé. He brought me some important intelligence from Normandy."

"'Tis Maulévrier, then, who has revealed the plot," mentally ejaculated Bourbon.

"I should not return with him, if he desired it," said Diane, "Your majesty must understand that the comte and I have quarrelled."

"Quarrelled! ah!" exclaimed François. "And so you took refuge from the husband you hate with the Duke de Bourbon – eh?"

"I do not hate my husband, sire, though he has compelled me to leave him. I came to the Château de Moulins with my father."

"And you expected to find your father with the Constable when you entered so suddenly just now, eh?" remarked the king, dryly.

"I did, sire. I came to inform them of your arrival at the château – little expecting to find your majesty here. I trust I may infer from your gracious and kindly aspect that the Constable is restored to favour?"

"He is fully restored," replied the king. "You will be pleased, I am sure, to learn that I have just promised him the command of half my Italian army."

"You have done well, sire," she rejoined. "With Bourbon in joint command with your majesty, victory will be assured. You will accompany the king?" she added to the Constable, with evident anxiety.

"I hope to do so," he replied. "At all events, I will follow as soon as my strength will permit me."

"Nay, I must have you with me," said the king.

"Right, sire – do not leave him behind," she whispered.

"I know the way to enforce obedience on the Constable's part," said the king. "I shall take you with me to Lyons, fair Diane. He will follow quickly then."

"Sire!" exclaimed Bourbon, with ill-concealed vexation, "the countess is here with her father!"

"What of that? I shall not ask his consent," replied the king. "The only person who has any right to object is Maulévrier, and he is not likely to interfere. The Comtesse de Châteaubriand and

a large party of court dames are in my train," he added to Diane. "You shall accompany them." He then continued in a low voice: "I cannot doubt the great influence you possess over Bourbon. What you say to him he will obey. Charge him, therefore, to join me a week hence at Lyons."

And he moved towards the other side of the chamber, as if to examine the portrait of the beautiful Clara de Gonzaga.

Diane instantly took advantage of the opportunity, and, approaching Bourbon, said, in a low voice, "You have accepted the king's offer? You will break with the Emperor and Henry VIII., will you not?"

"It is too late," replied the Constable, in the same tone. "I have signed the compact."

"But consider that the king has promised to share the command of the army with you?" she urged.

"Promises made by princes under such circumstances are rarely kept," replied Bourbon. "I can never be really restored to the king's favour."

"You wrong him," she said. "He is the soul of loyalty and honour."

"He loyal!" echoed Bourbon. "He is perfidious as his mother. I will not trust him."

"That is your determination?"

"My fixed determination," he rejoined.

"Then we shall never meet again – never, Charles," she said.

Bourbon made no reply, and his head sank upon his breast. At this moment the king turned round.

"Have you prevailed upon him, fair Diane?" he asked. "Yes, yes, he will come, sire," she answered, hastily. "You will?" she added to Bourbon, with an entreating look that ought to have been irresistible.

"You have said it," he rejoined.

"That is well," observed the king. "I knew you could not resist her persuasion."

Just then the door opened, and Jean de l'Hôpital entered the room.

"I crave your majesty's pardon for this interruption," he said, "but I am compelled to attend to my illustrious patient. It is necessary that his highness should take the draught prepared for him."

"I applaud your zeal, sir," replied François, "and I enjoin you to use all your art to restore the prince your master to health as quickly as may be. Think you he will be able to set out for Lyons in three days' time?"

"I will not answer for it, sire," replied Jean de l'Hôpital, consulting Bourbon by a look.

"In a week, then?" demanded the king.

"Perchance in a week, sire," replied the physician. "But he must travel slowly, for even then he will be very feeble."

"Come hither, sir," said the king, taking Jean de l'Hôpital aside. "Answer me truly, as you value your life. What ails the Constable?"

"His highness is labouring under a severe quotidian ague, caught at Montbrison," replied the physician. "The fever has proved of singular obstinacy, and will not yield to ordinary remedies. We are under great apprehensions," he added, lowering his voice, "that it may be followed by some mortal ailment, as consumption, or the black jaundice. His state is exceedingly critical, and demands the utmost care. Were he to take cold, I would not answer for his life."

"Hark ye, sir," said the king. "I know you *can* speedily cure him, if you will. Within a week I expect to see him at Lyons."

"I cannot perform impossibilities, sire," replied the physician; "but if it be in the power of medical skill to further your majesty's desires, you shall behold him at the time appointed."

Apparently satisfied, François then turned towards the Constable, and said:

"Adieu, cousin. I commend you to the care of your physician. But as I shall naturally be anxious to hear how you progress, I will leave behind me the Seigneur Perot de Warthy, who will send me daily tidings of you."

"That is needless, sire," said Bourbon, impatiently.

"Since you are pleased to express so much anxiety about me, I will despatch frequent messengers to you with the reports of my physicians."

"I prefer leaving Warthy," rejoined the king. "I can depend on him. Once more adieu, cousin. We shall meet again at Lyons."

And, offering his hand to Diane, he led her out of the room.

VII. PEROT DE WARTHY

Scarcely were they gone, when Bourbon sprang to his feet, and gave vent to an outburst of rage.

"By Heaven! I have had enough to do to play my part!" he exclaimed.

"I pray your highness to calm yourself!" cried Jean de l'Hopital. "His majesty may return."

"I wish he would return!" exclaimed Bourbon. "I was a fool to allow him to depart. But I must take instant counsel with my friends."

So saying, he thrice struck a small bell placed upon the table.

At the summons, a secret door opened, and a dozen young seigneurs, all of whom were armed, issued from a closet where they had been concealed. These persons were Bourbon's most devoted partisans, and comprised the Seigneurs Pomperant, François du Peloux, Tansannes, Espinat, Sainte-Bonnet, Desguières, Brion, and five others. "We have been impatiently awaiting the signal to come forth," said Pomperant. "But it seems our services were not required. I am sorry your highness allowed the king to depart."

"You shall hear what has occurred, and judge whether I have acted wisely," rejoined Bourbon.

And he then proceeded to relate what had passed between him and the monarch.

"I would not trust him!" exclaimed Tansannes. "His promises are worthless. How say you, messeigneurs?" he added to the others. "Are you not of my opinion?" There was a unanimous reply in the affirmative.

"It is not too late," said Pomperant. "We may yet secure his person. Entrust the matter to me. We have force enough to overpower the royal guard."

"The opportunity is tempting, I own," said Bourbon. "But the plan is too hazardous. It occurred to me while the king stood before me – but I rejected it."

"You did well, prince," remarked Saint-Vallier, who had entered the chamber by the same door that had admitted his daughter. "If you had seized the king, your own doom would have been certain."

"Who would have pronounced the sentence?" remarked Pomperant, sternly. "I repeat, it is not too late to secure the king. Your highness has but to say the word, and it shall be done."

"Ay, we are ready to execute your highness's orders, be they what they may," added the others.

"Are you all mad?" exclaimed Saint-Vallier. "Know you not that the archers of the royal guard are in the court of the château? – that the Duke de Longueville has four troops of light horse drawn up outside the gates? – that the town is invested by two thousand lansquenets, under the command of the Grand-Master? Any such attempt must end in discomfiture."

"We can carry off the king before his capture is discovered," said Pomperant.

"Impossible!" cried Saint-Vallier.

"You are lukewarm in the cause, cousin," said Bourbon. "Perhaps you may feel differently when I inform you that his majesty designs to take your daughter, the Comtesse de Maulévrier, with him to Lyons."

"Ha!" exclaimed Saint-Vallier, as if struck by a sharp pang. "Rather than this should be, I would consent to his capture."

"Who is mad now, M. le Comte?" remarked Pom-perant. "Will you entrust the beautiful Diane to this profligate monarch?"

"No, I would sooner see her perish," rejoined Saint-Vallier. "I will agree to any plan."

At this moment a warning exclamation was uttered by the physician who was stationed near the door.

At the signal, Bourbon hastily resumed his gown, and flung himself upon the couch.

Scarcely were these preparations completed, when Perot de Warthy and the Comte de Maulévrier entered. They both glanced suspiciously at the band of young seigneurs, who had withdrawn to the back of the chamber.

Saint-Vallier alone remained standing near the couch on which Bourbon was extended.

"What is your business with me, sir?" demanded the Constable of Warthy.

"I am enjoined by his majesty to remain in constant attendance upon your highness," replied the other, bowing.

"This fellow troubles me," muttered Bourbon; "I must get rid of him."

"Louis," said Saint-Vallier to his son-in-law, "I am glad you have come hither. I was about to seek you. You must take back Diane to Normandy."

"I cannot comply with your request," replied Maulévrier. "I return to the Château de Brézé forthwith."

"So much the better," cried Saint-Vallier. "Diane must accompany you."

"Impossible," replied Maulévrier. "She is gone with the Comtesse de Chateaubriand and the king to Lyons."

"Gone!" exclaimed Bourbon, starting up. "Has the king set out? I thought he meant to pass the night here?"

"He has changed his mind, and has just quitted the château with his suite."

"And you have allowed Diane to accompany him?" demanded Saint-Vallier, with a look of agony.

"Mort-Dieu! I could not prevent it," replied Maulévrier – "even if I had the wish," he added to himself.

Saint-Vallier made no remark, but it was easy to perceive his anguish.

Greatly excited by the unlooked-for intelligence, Bourbon could scarcely rest upon the couch.

"I cannot comprehend why the king should depart so suddenly," he said to Warthy. "Has he taken the troops with him?"

"No," replied the other. "He is only attended by the archers of the royal guard, and the young nobles forming his retinue. The Grand-Master and the Duke de Longueville are left behind with their men."

"For what purpose?" demanded Bourbon, sternly.

"To keep guard upon the château and the town," replied Warthy.

Bourbon exchanged a glance with his followers, which did not pass unobserved by Warthy.

"His majesty's parting order," remarked that vigilant personage, "was that no one – not even your highness – should be allowed to quit the château till to-morrow."

"Ha! By Saint Paul, it would seem we are prisoners, messeigneurs!" exclaimed the Constable, fiercely.

An indignant response was made by his adherents.

"No offence is intended to your highness by his majesty," said Warthy. "It is a mere measure of precaution – nothing more." Then, turning to Saint-Vallier, he added: "M. le Comte, it is the king's pleasure that you proceed to Lyons to-morrow."

"I will go now!" cried Saint-Vallier.

"That may not be," replied the other. "As I have just said, no one must quit the château to-day, on any pretext whatever."

"The keys of the château have been entrusted to me," said Maulévrier, "To-morrow I shall return them to the Seigneur des Ecures, your highness's chamberlain. If you have aught to say to me," he added to Saint-Vallier, "you will find me in the great hall."

So saying, he quitted the chamber.

"Why do you not go too, sir?" cried Bourbon, fiercely, to Warthy, finding that the latter remained.

"His majesty's injunctions to me were – "

"Leave me," interrupted Bourbon.

"I cannot disobey the king," cried the pertinacious Warthy.

But his remonstrances were cut short by Pomperant and the others, who forced him out of the room.

“Will no one deliver me from this plague?” exclaimed the Constable, springing from his couch.

“We will,” replied several voices.

“Be advised by me, cousin, and do him no mischief, endure – but bear it. By skilful management, aided by your physicians, you may lead this spy to give such reports to the king as may cause him to set out for Italy without you. Hitherto, as you know, I have strenuously opposed the plot, but my opinion is now changed. I would have it succeed. Be prudent, cousin, and our wrongs shall be avenged.”

“I will follow your counsel,” rejoined Bourbon. “But do you intend to obey the king’s order, and proceed to Lyons?”

“‘Tis needful I should do so,” replied Saint-Vallier. “My first business must be to deliver Diane. It is idle to hope for aid from her base-souled husband; but I will talk to him. Be content to play the sick man a little longer, cousin. It is of the last importance to your cause that the king should set out for Italy without you.”

So saying, he left the room, and sought Maulévrier in the great hall. But he produced no impression on his cold-hearted son-in-law.

VIII. HOW BOURBON QUITTED THE CHATEAU DE MOULINS,

Next morning, Maulévrier delivered up the keys of the château to the chamberlain, and, without seeking any further interview with the Constable, set off for Normandy.

By noon both the Grand-Master and the Duke de Longueville had quitted Moulins with their men, and were marching towards La Palisse. Saint-Vallier accompanied them. Warthy, however, remained, and Bourbon submitted to the annoyance of his frequent visits. If Jean de l'Hôpital could be believed, no improvement had taken place in the Constable's health.

Three days passed in this manner, but, on the morning of the fourth, Warthy made his appearance in a riding-dress, booted and spurred, and informed the Constable, who was lying on his couch as usual, and attended by his physicians, that he was about to set out for Lyons to make a report in person to the king.

"Express my profound regrets to his majesty that I am not able to join him," said Bourbon, secretly overjoyed by the anticipated departure of his tormentor, "As you yourself must have perceived, I am rather worse than better, and my physicians tell me – and indeed I myself perceive – that there is no prospect of immediate improvement, I would pray the king, therefore, not to wait for me longer, but to set out on his expedition."

"I will convey your highness's message," replied Warthy. "But I know the king will be grievously disappointed."

"My own disappointment is greater than his majesty's can be, sir. I pray you assure him so," rejoined Bourbon.

A slightly incredulous smile passed over Warthy's shrewd features at this observation. However, he made no remark, but, taking leave of the Constable, set out on his journey, mounted on a fleet steed, which soon carried him several leagues on his way.

No sooner was Bourbon freed from the restraint imposed upon him by the importunate spy, than he commenced preparations, and despatched a body of men with arms and ammunition, under the command of Captain Saint-Saphorin, to his château of Chantelle, instructing them to put that fortress at once into a state of complete defence.

"I shall be there myself in a few days," he said to Saint-Saphorin. "Moulins, I find, is quite untenable."

This state of repose was not of long continuance. Warthy, who had been provided with relays of the fleetest horses, was back again in an incredibly short time, and Bourbon, to his infinite annoyance, was obliged to resume his couch. He received the spy in a very ill humour, but Warthy did not appear to heed his displeasure.

"Highness," he said, "the king is much offended. He will not believe you are so ill as you represent. And he commands you, on your allegiance, to join him without delay."

"That is wholly impossible, sir," interposed Jean de l'Hôpital. "The Lord Constable is far too ill to travel. I fear you have not explained fully his dangerous condition to the king."

"I have reported all I have seen," replied Warthy. "But his majesty will take no more excuses."

"Excuses, sir!" cried Bourbon, fiercely. "Dare you insinuate – "

"I but repeat the king's message to your highness," replied Warthy. "His majesty, as I have said, is highly offended, and declares he will no longer be trifled with. He peremptorily orders you to join him at Lyons without delay. If you fail to do so – " And he hesitated to proceed.

"Well, sir – what if I fail?" demanded Bourbon, slightly raising himself, and fixing a stern glance on the messenger, "His majesty will send the Grand-Master and Marshal de Chabannes with three thousand lansquenets to fetch you," rejoined Warthy.

"Mort-Dieu! am I to be told this?" cried Bourbon.

And he would have sprung from the couch, if the two physicians had not thrown themselves upon him, and held him forcibly down.

"You will betray yourself if you give way thus," whispered Jean do l'Hôpital. "I pray your highness to be calm."

Yielding to the advice, the Constable controlled himself by a great effort.

There was a pause, during which the spy remained intently watching the Constable.

"What answer shall I return to his majesty?" asked Warthy, at length.

"Say I will come," replied Bourbon.

"Highness, it is not possible that you can travel," said Jean de l'Hôpital. "His majesty cannot desire your death."

"It would seem as though he did," rejoined Bourbon. "But, be the consequences what they may, I will set out to-morrow. Tell his majesty so," he added to Warthy. "When do you return to Lyons?"

"Within an hour," was the reply. "I am charged to come back instantly, and, as I have relays of horses, I shall not be long on the road. His majesty will be well content with your highness's determination."

And, with a profound bow, he quitted the room.

"May the devil go with him!" exclaimed Bourbon, as he sprang from his couch. "If I detain this spy," he thought, "the king will execute his threat, and send the Grand-Master and Chabannes to take me. Here, in this château, I can offer no resistance, but in Chantelle I may stand a siege, and hold up till I can obtain reinforcements. I must proceed thither without delay."

As soon as Warthy had departed, a conference was held between Bourbon and his followers, in which it was agreed on all hands that it would not be safe to remain longer at Moulins, and it was therefore decided to remove to Chantelle, a fortress in Auvergne, which the Constable considered impregnable. This decision being arrived at, preparations for departure were made with all possible despatch.

Determining to take with him all his treasure and valuables, Bourbon emptied his coffers, and caused their contents, amounting to more than thirty thousand golden crowns of the sun, to be sewn up in stout leathern bags. In like manner his jewels and other valuables were removed from their caskets, and packed up in valises. Could he have done so, he would have carried off his silver drinking-vessels and plate as well. These preparations made, the majority of the conspirators, escorted by a troop of three hundred men-at-arms, fully equipped, quitted the chateau at nightfall, and proceeded towards Auvergne. The bags containing the gold pieces were entrusted to veteran soldiers. The young seigneurs took charge of the jewels.

Bourbon's object being to gain time, he did not accompany the troop, but tarried till the following morning, when, pretending that he was about to join the king at Lyons, he entered his litter, and attended by his physicians, and by a small escort commanded by Pomperant, proceeded along the beautiful valley of the Allier towards La Palisse, where he rested for the night.

Next day he continued his journey across a hilly tract of country to a small town, all the time keeping close within his litter. On the third day he reached Changy, and here his physicians gave out that the journey had seriously aggravated his malady, and that it was utterly impossible for him to proceed farther at present. Bourbon's design was to wait at Changy till he could obtain intelligence of the king's movements from secret agents whom he had despatched for the purpose to Lyons.

Before these messengers could return, Warthy made his appearance at Changy, and, being informed of the Constable's increased illness, to which he attached little credence, sought an interview with him, This was granted without difficulty, and the spy found the duke in bed, with his physicians in attendance upon him.

"You see, sir," he remarked to Warthy, "I have made every effort to comply with his majesty's commands, but my strength has entirely failed me. However, I feel somewhat better to-day, and to-morrow I hope to reach Roanne. I pray you return to the king, and tell him how you have found me."

"My orders are not to quit your highness," rejoined Warthy; "and if I return without you, I am persuaded his majesty will put his threats into execution, and order your immediate arrest."

"His majesty will act as he deems best. I must decline further discourse with you," said Bourbon, turning from him.

Warthy felt almost certain he was duped by the Constable and his physicians, but as some doubts still lingered in his mind, he determined to return to Lyons, where he arrived early next morning. From the report given him by the spy, François felt convinced of the Constable's duplicity.

"He is playing me false," he said. "But I will baffle his schemes. Return to him at once, and do not leave him again. If any further difficulties arise, despatch messengers to me, and I will send the Grand-Marshal and the Marshal de Chabannes to seize him."

IX. CHANTELLE

The indefatigable Warthy departed on his mission. On arriving at Changy his worst suspicions were verified. The sick man and his attendants were no longer there. But instead of pursuing his route towards Lyons, as he had promised, the Constable had turned back towards Moulins.

Despatching a messenger to the king with this information, Warthy rode on to La Palisse, and thence to Varennes, where, it appeared, the Constable had laid aside all disguise, and, abandoning his litter, had mounted a charger, and ridden off with his suite to the Château de la Chantelle, in Auvergne. Disregarding the risk he might incur in following him, Warthy despatched a second messenger to the king, and started in pursuit. He was only a few hours behind the Constable, and being well mounted, hoped to overtake him before he arrived at Chantelle.

Speeding across the wide plain of the Allier, skirted on the east by the mountains of Forez, he soon reached the small town of Saint-Pourçain, where he obtained a fresh horse, and ascertained, at the same time, that the Constable and his attendants were only two or three leagues in advance of him. From Saint-Pourçain he entered the vale of the Sioule, and, pursuing his course by the side of the river, soon found himself among the mountains of Auvergne.

The region he had now gained was highly picturesque, but Warthy noted little of its beauties, being engrossed by the thought of the dangerous errand on which he was bent. But, though fully aware of the risk he incurred, Warthy did not shrink from it.

After tracking the sinuous course of the river through the mountains, whose funnel-shaped cones and rifted sides proclaimed them to be extinct volcanoes, and remarking several ancient strongholds, perched on commanding points, he emerged into a broad plain watered by the Sioule, whose course he had hitherto followed. He now plainly descried the lordly château of Chantelle, about two leagues off situated on a rocky eminence, the base of which was washed by the river. It was a vast and strongly-built fortress, and from its position seemed well capable of standing a siege.

As Warthy's eye ranged over the intervening district he caught sight of a troop of horsemen, whose arms were glittering in the sunbeams, and entertaining no doubt that the cavalcade consisted of Bourbon and his attendants, he set spurs to his charger and galloped on. But swiftly as he speeded, to overtake the Constable was now impossible, and he was still half a league off, when he beheld the train pass through the outer gates of the castle.

As he approached yet nearer to the fortress, he plainly perceived that it had been put into a state of defence, the ramparts and bastions being armed with ordnance of large size, and the towers with culverins and falconets. Sentinels were pacing to and fro on the battlements, and a guard was stationed on the outer gate. From the summit of the donjon floated Bourbon's haughty standard, which had been unfurled immediately after his arrival. The din of martial instruments resounded from the outer court of the castle, and when Warthy, after some little delay, obtained admittance, he found the enclosure full of armed men.

Bourbon had not thrown off his riding-cloak, and was Conversing with Tansannes, Saint-Saphorin, and others, in a great hall with a roof supported by rafters of chesnut, and walls adorned with trophies of the chase – huge antlers, skins of bears, wolves, foxes, wild cats, and marmots, with which the adjacent mountains abounded – when the arrival of the king's messenger was announced.

The Constable ordered him to be at once admitted, and on his appearance, said to him, in a jocular tone, "What! here already, Messire de Warthy! You spur me hard, my friend."

"Your highness must have better spurs than mine, since you have got here first," replied Warthy, in the same tone. "I am glad to find you can ride so well. You can now have no reasonable excuse for disobeying the king's injunctions. I hope you will accompany me to Lyons."

"A truce to this, sir!" cried Bourbon, changing his manner. "I have come hither to be free from the persecution to which I have been subjected. Unless I have the king's written promise to restore

me my possessions, I will not stir from this castle. If he refuses my just demand, there will be a war in France more dreadful than any the kingdom has yet endured."

"I grieve to hear your highness threaten rebellion, for I can only so construe your words," replied Warthy, courageously. "It is not for me to predict what his majesty's reply will be to your demand, but I fancy it will be conveyed by the Grand-Master and the Marshal de Chabannes, at the head of an overwhelming force."

"I am of opinion that the king will return a very different answer, sir," said Bourbon. "He knows he has treated me unjustly, and when he finds I am in a position to obtain redress, he will offer it. But be his decision what it may, I am prepared."

"I would fain remonstrate with your highness before you take this terrible step," said Warthy. "Powerful as you are, you cannot resist the king."

"That remains to be seen, sir. I am resolved to have justice, which has been so long denied me."

"Then at the hazard of my life I must perform mv duty," rejoined Warthy, boldly. "I now proclaim to all your followers that if they shall aid you in holding this castle against their sovereign lord and king, to whom, and not to you, they owe fealty and homage, they will be guilty of lèse-majesté, and will be treated as rebels and traitors."

"Will your highness allow this insolent fellow to brave you thus?" cried Pomperant, furiously. "Order his instant execution."

Warthy did not blench, though he felt he was in a most critical position.

"Remember, I am sent hither by the king," he said.

"The king cannot save you!" cried Tansannes.

"No, but he can avenge me," replied Warthy, resolutely.

"The audacious spy deserves a dog's death," cried François du Peloux. "Let him be hanged at once."

"Or flung from the battlements," said Saint-Saphorin.

"No," said Bourbon; "he has given his tongue unwarrantable license, but he has come hither as the king's messenger, and his person is safe. You must be content to remain here till to-morrow, Messire de Warthy, when you will take a letter from me to the king. The Bishop of Autun, who is here, shall accompany you, in order that he may explain my conduct to his majesty."

"I must perforce remain as long as your highness chooses," replied Warthy.

"You ought to thank me for detaining you," said Bourbon. "You must want rest after your journey. See that all care be taken of him," he added to an attendant.

Upon this Warthy withdrew.

After inspecting the garrison, Bourbon proceeded to examine the defences of the fortress, to make sure of its capability of resisting a siege. The examination was very carefully conducted, and occupied several hours. At its conclusion, he held a private conference with all his chief adherents, at which it was unanimously agreed that the place was not strong enough to hold out against the powerful army which would infallibly be sent to besiege t by the king.

"If it should fall before I can be reinforced, my cause will be ruined," said Bourbon; "and the German lanz-knechts enrolled by the Archduke Ferdinand, though already assembled in the Franche-Comté, will not dare to enter France while the king remains at Lyons. For my own part," he continued, "I am satisfied that his majesty is too much alarmed to quit the kingdom at present, and if he should decide on crossing the Alps, he will assuredly leave behind him an army of six or seven thousand men. The presence of such a force will prevent the contemplated rising, and the nobles of Auvergne, whom I had summoned by the arrière-ban to unite at Roanne, will disperse without striking a blow. What is to be done under these circumstances? Shall we retire to Carlat? Though more inaccessible, that castle is no better able to stand a siege than the fortress we now occupy."

"To be shut up amid the mountains might be fatal," remarked Tansannes. "Let us make the best of our way to the Franche-Comté, where your highness can put yourself at the head of the German lanz-knechts."

"The lanz-knechts are already commanded by two able leaders, the Counts Wilhelm and Felix de Furstenberg," replied Bourbon. "I will not become a fugitive from my own territories while there is a chance of holding them. A few days will now decide. My letter, which will be conveyed to the king by Warthy, will bring the matter to a crisis. If, as I fear, his majesty should abandon his expedition to Italy, nothing will be left for us but flight."

Next day, Warthy left the castle, accompanied by the Bishop of Autun. On the farther side of La Palisse they encountered the Marshal de Chabannes and the Grand Master, who were marching at the head of a large force, consisting of light horsemen and fantassins, to seize the Constable. On discovering this force, the bishop contrived to send off a messenger to warn Bourbon.

The bishop himself was arrested, and sent on to Lyons with a guard, under the charge of Warthy.

X. HOW THE BISHOP OF AUTUN AND THE COMTE DE SAINT-VALLIER WERE

ARRESTED

On a plain, outside the fair city of Lyons, was encamped the army destined for the expedition to Italy. In the midst of the camp stood the royal tent. Thither the Bishop of Autun was taken by Warthy. François had just returned from inspecting his troops. His towering figure was sheathed in glittering steel, but he had taken off his plumed helm and given it to a page, at the moment when the bishop was brought in.

After glancing at the Constable's letter, which was delivered to him by Warthy, François tore it in pieces, exclaiming furiously, "Does the audacious traitor venture to treat me as an equal, and propose terms to me! Foi de gentilhomme! I will lower his pride. Hitherto I have acted too leniently towards him, but now he shall feel my power. I have striven to save him, but since he is insensible to my kindness, and will rush upon his ruin, e'en let him perish!"

"Your majesty forgets that you have driven the Constable to desperation," said the Bishop of Autun. "Could he have placed faith in your promises, he would be with you now. I implore your majesty to make terms with him, and, by so doing, avoid a most disastrous war."

"My lord bishop," said the king, sternly, "I will not hear a word in the traitor's behalf. He can expect no grace from me, and, by Saint Louis! he shall have none. He thinks himself safe in Chantelle, but I will take it in a week; and if he seeks refuge in the mountains of Auvergne, I will hunt him down like a wild beast. I will proclaim him as a rebel and traitor throughout the realm, and set a price of ten thousand golden crowns upon his head. All who shall harbour him, or assist him or any of His followers, shall be held guilty of treason. And now, my lord bishop, a word with you. You are concerned in this conspiracy, and, if you would obtain grace and restoration to my favour, you will not hesitate to reveal all you know respecting it."

"I have nothing to reveal, sire," replied the bishop.

"You are the depositary of the Constable's secrets, my lord," remarked François, sternly.

"Whatever his highness may have confided to me under the seal of confession, is sacred, sire," rejoined the bishop.

"That excuse will not avail you, my lord. You are bound to disclose a conspiracy against your sovereign. By Saint Louis! I *will* have the truth. All those who are in any way implicated in the plot, or suspected, shall be immediately arrested. One of the chief conspirators is already in my power. I will interrogate him at once. Bring the Comte de Saint-Vallier before me," he added to Warthy. "You will find him in the adjoining tent, with his daughter, the Comtesse de Maulévrier."

"Am I to arrest him, sire?" demanded Warthy.

The king replied in the affirmative, and Warthy departed on his errand, returning presently with Saint-Vallier, who was guarded by two halberdiers.

Just as François was about to interrogate the prisoner, Diane de Poitiers rushed into the tent, and threw herself at the king's feet, exclaiming:

"My father has been unjustly accused, sire. He is no traitor."

"I trust he may be able to clear himself, madame," rejoined the king, raising her gently. "But as it will be painful to you to listen to his examination, I must pray you to retire."

"You have disobeyed my injunctions in coming hither, Diane," said Saint-Vallier, reproachfully. "Your presence adds to my trouble. Go, I implore you!"

"No, no, I will not leave you," she rejoined. "I may be able to plead your cause. I can show his majesty that he has not a more loyal subject than yourself – that you are incapable of the crime with which you are charged – and that if there should be a conspiracy headed by the Duke de Bourbon, which I cannot – will not – believe, you have no part in it."

"Can the Comte dc Saint-Vallier himself give me such assurance, madame?" said the king.

"Undoubtedly, sire," replied Diane. "Speak, father! You have no share in any plot?"

"I know of no plot," rejoined Saint-Vallier. "But I am well aware that I have many enemies, who would not hesitate to accuse me falsely. Who charges me with conspiracy against your majesty?" he added to the king.

"I do," replied Warthy. "I charge you with leaguing with the king's enemies, and I will bring proof of what I assert."

"I defy you to do so," replied Saint-Vallier; "and if the combat be permitted me by his majesty, I will force you, at the point of the sword, to confess that you have accused me falsely."

"You must establish your innocence by other means than the combat," rejoined the king. "You have long been Bourbon's confidential friend and adviser. You have been staying with him at the Château de Moulins. Is it not certain, then, that you must be privy to his designs?"

"Presumption is no proof, sire," said Saint-Vallier. "If the Constable de Bourbon has any such designs as your majesty attributes to him, he has carefully concealed them from me."

"You abuse my patience by these idle prevarications," cried the king, angrily. "By an immediate avowal of your guilt, and by a disclosure of all you know respecting this conspiracy, you might merit my forgiveness."

"And think you, sire, that if I were leagued in such a plot, I would purchase safety by betraying my associates?" rejoined Saint-Vallier. "No, I would rather perish on the scaffold."

"Such will be your fate," said the king, sternly. "But torture shall extort the truth from you."

"Oh! sire," exclaimed Diane, again flinging herself at the king's feet, "do not have recourse to such terrible measures. Spare him the torture! – spare him!"

"Let him confess his guilt, then – let him reveal all he knows regarding the plot," rejoined François.

"Torture will not force me to speak," said Saint-Val-lier, resolutely. "I should be unworthy of the name I bear if I could betray iny friends. Cease to intercede for me, Diane," he added to his daughter.

"Remove the prisoners," said François to Warthy, "and let them be taken with a strong escort to Paris, and lodged in the Conciergerie, there to be kept till commissioners shall be appointed for their trial by the Parliament."

"Sire," said Diane, "I crave your majesty's permission to attend my unhappy father to Paris. My presence will be some consolation to him."

"I cannot grant your request, madame," replied the king, in an inflexible tone. "You must remain here with the Comtesse de Châteaubriand, Take leave of your father, and let him depart."

Half distracted, Diane flung herself in her father's arms. While straining her to his breast, Saint-Vallier said, in a low voice:

"Stay not here. Depart instantly for Normandy. Promise me this, and I shall die content."

"You shall not die, father," she cried. "I will obtain your pardon. I will not cease to supplicate the king till he yields."

"I forbid it," rejoined Saint-Vallier, authoritatively. "Obey me, as you would know peace hereafter."

Diane made no reply. Overcome by her emotion, she had swooned in his arms.

Female attendants were instantly summoned from the adjoining tent, which was appropriated to the Comtesse de Chateaubriand and her ladies, and Saint-Vallier having committed his daughter to the charge of these women, quitted the tent with the Bishop of Autun and Warthy.

The king's injunctions were promptly carried into effect. While the two prisoners were despatched with a guard strong enough to prevent, any attempt at rescue, to Paris, and lodged in the Conciergerie, there to await, their trial, officers were sent forth to all the principal towns in the Lyonnois, the Borbonnois, Auvergne, Bourgogne, and Dauphiné, to proclaim by sound of trumpet the Constable de Bourbon a rebel and a traitor, and to offer in the king's name a reward of ten thousand golden crowns of the sun for his capture. Orders were at the same time issued that all the southern frontiers of the kingdom should be strictly guarded, so as to prevent his flight.

By such means the alarm was spread far and wide with inconceivable rapidity, and it seemed scarcely possible that Bourbon could escape.

Meanwhile, the Grand-Master and the Marshal de Chabannes had marched, without opposition, to Chantelle. There was no necessity to summon the fortress to surrender. The gates were thrown open by Saint-Sa-phorin, who was left in command, on the approach of the assailants. But the Constable and his chief adherents were gone, and, as far as could be ascertained, had taken refuge amid the mountains of Auvergne. The two leaders, therefore, having compelled the garrison to lay down their arms, arrested Saint-Saphorin, took possession of the fortress in the king's name, and despatched several bodies of men in pursuit of the fugitives.

Warthy was also on Bourbon's track, having sworn to effect his capture.

XI. MARCELLINE D'HERMENT

Late at night, the messenger despatched by the Bishop of Autun to warn Bourbon of his danger, reached Chantelle, and before dawn the Constable had quitted the fortress, attended by his principal adherents. His escort comprised a hundred well-armed men, to twelve of whom were entrusted the leathern bags containing the treasure.

After traversing a long mountainous defile, remarkable for its grand and savage scenery, he reached Montaigut, where he dismounted, and entering the church, performed Lis devotions, and besought Heaven's aid in his difficulties.

Leaving Montaigut, he soon became involved in a range of volcanic mountains, and after a long ride through this extraordinary region, he came to the Château Lafayette – an old feudal stronghold, built on a vast lava current, which had issued in bygone ages from the crater of the Puy de Come.

Riding up to its gates, he was heartily welcomed by the châtelain, who hospitably entertained him and his train, cheering them with a liberal supply of the generous wine for which the district is renowned.

Lafayette would fain have persuaded Bourbon to tarry with him, but the Constable declined, alleging that he intended to pass the night at the Château d'Herment.

Again the fugitive's way led him through mountainous defiles, and night overtook him long before he reached his destination. Harbingers had been sent on to announce his approach, and as he and his followers climbed the steep and dangerous ascent to the fortress, a number of men, carrying blazing pine-wood torches, issued from the gates, and lighted them on their way. At their head was the young châtelain, who greeted Bourbon with profound respect, and placed his castle and all within it at his disposal.

The Seigneur d'Herment was a young man of some two or three-and-twenty – tall, powerfully built, and handsome. He was habited in a green hunting-dress and buff boots, and wore a broad-leaved grey felt hat, ornamented with a white feather, on his head. With him were two large shaggy hounds, which had pulled down many a lordly stag, torn in pieces many a wolf, had engaged more than one bear, and would not have hesitated to attack any other wild animal.

D'Herment dwelt in his lonely castle with his sister Marcelline, whose beauty and courage were the theme of admiration throughout that wild district. Marcelline was nearly five years younger than her brother, whom she strikingly resembled in feature, and even in character. Though her pursuits were masculine, and though her time was passed among horses and hounds, though she could manage a hawk better than her own falconer, though she could tire out the most energetic horseman, though she never missed the mark with arbalest or petronel, there was nothing in Marcelline's manner unbecoming the gentlest damsel. Her features, it is true, had a resolute expression, not often met with in a maiden of eighteen, her mouth and chin being proudly cut, and her fine nostrils often distended like those of a deer. Her complexion was embrowned by the sun, her eyes large, bright, and blue, and her luxuriant tresses of a lovely auburn. Her attire, though savouring little of court fashion, and boasting few ornaments, became her well, and displayed her tall and symmetrical figure to the greatest advantage. Her black velvet toque was adorned with the plume of an eagle which she herself had shot.

Such was the damsel who greeted Bourbon and his companions as they entered the great hall of the castle. Her remarkable beauty could not fail to strike the young nobles who were now presented to her by her brother, but she seemed insensible to the admiration she excited, and entirely occupied in attending to the Duke de Bourbon, whom she conducted to the upper table. She made no apology for the repast which was set before the Constable and his followers, and, indeed, it needed none, for though the viands were homely they were abundant, and the appetites of the guests, sharpened by their long ride, enabled them to do ample justice to the substantial dishes with which the board was loaded. Moreover, the wine was excellent, and plentifully supplied.

At the close of the repast Marcelline arose, and as the Constable led her forth he thanked her for her hospitality, and bade her adieu, stating that he should depart long before daylight.

In consideration of the fatigue they had undergone, and the extraordinarily early hour at which it had been arranged that they were to depart, most of the Con stable's attendants now retired to rest; but, before seeking his chamber, Bourbon had an hour's private conference with D'Herment, at which Pomperant and Tansannes were present.

Just as the castle clock struck two, torches flashed in the great court, and showed the enclosure filled with horsemen. Shortly afterwards the chief part of the Constable's adherents made their appearance, and mounted their steeds. Ere many more minutes, Bourbon, attended by the châtelain, descended into the court, muffled in a heavy riding-cloak, doubtless to protect him from the fresh morning air. After taking leave of D'Herment, and casting a hasty glance around to ascertain that the men to whom the bags of treasure had been confided were there, he rode out of the gateway, followed by his train.

On gaining the valley he struck spurs into his steed, and the whole troop proceeded at a quick pace in the direction of the Château de Carlat, whither they were bound. Thus they passed on through a wild district, the volcanic mountains looking singularly fantastic in the gloom. Bourbon rode on in front alone, and seemed buried in thought.

At last, when day began to dawn, and the cones and craters of the mountains became more distinct, the leader of the party checked his horse, and signed to the troop to halt. The order was instantly obeyed. But what was the surprise of the young seigneurs, and indeed of the whole cavalcade, when their chief facing them, and throwing aside his cloak, disclosed the features of Tansannes!

Exclamations of surprise and anger arose on all sides.

"What is the meaning of this? Where is the Lord Constable? Has he deserted us?" cried several voices.

"He is on his way to the Franche-Comté," replied Tansannes. "Instead of retiring to rest, he quitted the Château d'Herment at midnight, disguised, and attended only by Pomperant. His aim is to gain Saint-Claude with as much expedition as possible, and we are to join him there."

This announcement caused great discontent among the young seigneurs, and they gave loud utterance to their anger.

"Pardieu! the Constable has done ill to desert us," cried Peloux, "We would all have shed our last drop of blood for him. He had better have died with his friends than be captured ingloriously."

"The Constable will never be taken alive," said Tansannes.

"But he should not have left us without a word," said Saint-Bonnet. "It looks as if he could not trust us."

"He felt you would refuse to leave him," said Tansannes.

"Why, so we should," rejoined Desguières. "I, for one, would never have left him."

"It was the conviction that a large escort must necessarily increase his risk, that caused him to abandon you," said Tansannes. "But he trusts you will rejoin him at Saint-Claude. He confides his treasure to your charge."

"Nothing, then, is left us but to cry 'Sauve qui peut,' and disperse," said Peloux. "Let each man make the best of his way to the frontier."

"Agreed," replied the others.

"Saint-Claude must be our rendezvous," said Tansannes. "A week hence, if all be well, we will meet there. Vive Bourbon!"

"Vive Bourbon!" exclaimed the others, and the shout was echoed by the whole troop.

The young seigneurs then bade each other adieu, and rode off in different directions, each taking with him a bag of gold, and a guard of a dozen soldiers.

XII. THE CHATEAU DE LALLIÈRES

Notwithstanding what Tansannes had asserted, Bourbon had not quitted the Château d'Herment, but had remained in his chamber while his followers rode away. The only persons taken into his confidence besides the châtelain, were Pomperant and Tansannes, the former of whom remained to attend his lord and aid his escape, while the latter undertook to personate him. The Constable was loth to separate from his devoted followers, but D'Herment convinced him that if he retained so numerous a suite he would inevitably be tracked and captured. In this opinion Tansannes and Pomperant concurred, and at last Bourbon yielded to their arguments. It was also thought advisable, for greater security, that the Constable should disguise himself as a serving-man, and for this purpose a doublet and hose of russet serge were procured for him. A short mantle of knitted worsted, with a hood attached to it, enabled him partially to conceal his features.

All being arranged, after an early meal D'Herment rode forth from his castle, with the ostensible purpose of trying some newly-manned hawks, He was accompanied by his sister and Pomperant, and the trio were followed by Bourbon, disguised as before mentioned, and by a couple of falconers, each having a hawk upon his wrist.

After more than an hour's ride among the mountains, they came to a lake formed by the damming up of a river by a tremendous stream of lava which had flowed from the side of a lofty volcanic mountain.

The lake was of some extent, and its borders were in places fringed by trees, while the shallower parts were full of reeds, bulrushes, and aquatic plants. Marcelline now took a hawk from one of the falconers, and a heron shortly afterwards rising from the reeds, she quickly unhooded the hawk, and cast it off. On perceiving its danger, the heron flew swiftly upwards, followed with equal swiftness by the hawk, and to such a height did they soar, that they looked like specks, and eventually almost vanished from sight. When they reappeared, the hawk was uppermost, and soon stooped upon her prey, and ere another minute the heron fell dead within a few yards of Marcelline.

A bittern was next roused, but the party were prevented from continuing the sport by the appearance of a troop of horsemen coming from the direction of the chateau. No doubt could be entertained that this troop, which consisted of a dozen men and a captain, were in pursuit of the Constable. There was no time for deliberation, but Marcelline was equal to the emergency.

"Ride on with the prince," she said to her brother. "Let the Seigneur Pomperant go with me. They will take him for the Constable. We can make our way across the mountains to the Château de Lallières. If you can baffle pursuit, you will find us there."

To this bold proposition D'Herment at once agreed, and the courageous damsel, calling upon Pomperant to follow her, dashed up the rugged side of the mountain. At the same moment, D'Herment, followed by Bourbon and the falconers, galloped off along a road which skirted the banks of the lake.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.