

resolved first to propitiate him by bringing about a reconciliation with his brother. To this end he sent to Nancy his secretary, M. de Chavigny, accompanied by some gentlemen of his suite. We gave the Cardinalists a most cordial reception, for we were tired of exile and anxious to revisit the gay court of France. I was entrusted with the task of treating confidentially with Chavigny as to the terms of the amnesty: the preliminaries were soon arranged. Some time after their arrival, I dined with the Cardinalists at the hospitality of "The Three Saracens," where they had put up: Fonttrailles, Montresor, De Suze and Villenore, were also of the party. The conversation was lively and animated, and the wine-flagons were rapidly emptied. I was in excellent spirits, for, on the one hand, my wife had so far recovered as to leave her chamber, and on the other, I saw the immediate prospect of my patron recovering the good graces of his Sovereign and brother.

"*Mort de ma vie!*" cried Chavigny, "the Court will gain much by a reconciliation. There is rather an eclipse of stars there at the present time, my dear Cossé! and I hear much of the beauty of your fair wife."

"A very Venus in ruff and farthingale!" exclaimed De Suze.

"Mere report can give you no idea of her," rejoined Villenore.

"But you will see her to-morrow at the ducal chapel," added Fonttrailles, "and you will avow, I am certain, that you have left few women at Paris who will rival her."

"I trust I may anticipate the honour of being presented to her?" said Chavigny, looking towards me.

"If you will sup with me to-morrow evening together with your friends," I replied, smiling, "the Marchioness de Cossé will do her best to entertain you."

"What a treasure such a woman is to her husband!" said M. de Laubardemont—one of the Cardinalists—with a sinister smile.

I sat between him and Chavigny, and remarked that his further speech was checked by a glance from the latter. The others, however, kept up a running fire of raillery, which seemed to amuse them much, although I could not see the point or direction of their wit. I laughed with them out of complaisance, but my friends became more and more taciturn; and I caught them glancing at each other with symptoms of anger and impatience.

"Enough of this!" at length exclaimed Fonttrailles; "let us talk of more serious subjects, M. de Chavigny!"

"What is the matter with you, Fonttrailles?"

I interrupted; "you are pale as a phantom fresh from the tomb. Drink and laugh, as you see us do!"

He shook his head gravely, but made no reply.

"I see, my dear Marquis!" whispered Chavigny. "that you are in the mood I wished to find you. His Eminence has charged me to make you the most brilliant offers, if you persuade *Monsieur* to accept—You understand me?"

"If the conditions are honorable—"

"Oh! honorable of course! But that is nothing. You can do as you please with him—he is sure to follow your advice."

"You deceive yourself, M. de Chavigny! you overrate by far my poor influence."

"Come, come! you will not persuade us of that!" and he accompanied his words with a smile of intelligence that was quite incomprehensible.

"Why mince the matter?" growled Laubardemont. "Say a word to your wife, and all is settled!"

"What does this mean, gentlemen?" I asked, with surprise and impatience.

"It means," hastily interposed Chavigny, "that Laubardemont is half-drunk, and knows not what he is saying."

But the blow was struck, and I insisted that the words of the Cardinalist should be explained.

"Do not annoy yourself, my dear Cossé!" said the secretary, in his blandest accents.

"But, after all, had you not better cease for a moment to be deaf and blind? We are amongst friends—why will you not understand us?"

My astonishment was at its height. I did not know what these mysterious words meant, but something at the bottom of my heart whispered that they concealed an insult. An aimless anger agitated my breast, but I restrained myself and replied in a loud and grave voice—

"Gentlemen! I request that you will explain yourselves more clearly."

"Ah!" cried Chavigny, looking towards Laubardemont, "can it be, after all, that the Marquis is not in the secret?"

"Impossible!" responded the other, with a significant shrug of the shoulders.

"Do you wish to drive me mad with your ambiguous phrases? Speak, and to the purpose!"

"Listen, Marquis!" said Chavigny, "and answer me frankly!"

"You may reckon upon it, sir! My friends here know me for a man of honour, incapable of trafficking with my heart and my conscience."

The Cardinalists looked to the Orlennists, who cast down their eyes and remained silent—