

CHAPTER XXI.

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ACCUSATION.
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ALBERT DE CROISSI was the first to break the silence which had succeeded the Coadjutor's welcome announcement.

"Your Majesty," he exclaimed with animation, "seems still inclined to continue your confidence in a pretended friend, who serves you in a manner difficult to be characterised; but I may be permitted to enquire how he has become so well acquainted with an enterprise never confided to him, unless it is that he has suborned some one to betray your Majesty's secrets?"

The Coadjutor, with all his skill and tact, appeared embarrassed by this abrupt question; he hesitated to reply, and Croissi, sensible of his advantage, sought to crush him at one blow.

"Madame!" he said firmly to the Queen Regent; "Whatever may happen to me, I desire to give your Majesty still another proof of my zeal and devotion. The Coadjutor himself avows that he has been for some time acquainted with the truth as regards this affair, and I must now inform you whence he gathers the secret projects of the court, in order to reveal or thwart them. Will your Majesty please to recollect what I was saying at the time when the Coadjutor entered?—You have warmed a serpent in your bosom, and this girl, in whom you have reposed such confidence—"

"Speak out, Sir! explain yourself!" exclaimed Anne of Austria, with an angry glance at the trembling girl by her side.

"Do you remember, Madame," resumed the Baron, "at whose recommendation Mademoiselle de Montglat was admitted among your attendants."

"Yes—it was the Duchess de Chevreuse."

"Madame de Chevreuse and Mademoiselle de Chevreuse," continued de Croissi, with a sarcastic glance at Paul de Gondi, "are, as every one in Paris knows, the very intimate friends of the Coadjutor; and as Madame de Chevreuse is the patroness of Mademoiselle de Montglat—"

He still hesitated, and the Queen struck the floor passionately with her foot.

"Speak clearly," she exclaimed, "I desire you—I command you!"

"Well, Madame! I maintain that the Countess de Montglat disclosed to the Duchess de Chevreuse all the secrets of your Majesty of which she became possessed, and that Madame de Chevreuse in her turn, communicated them to the Coadjutor. A conversation between your maid of honour and the Duchess, which I once by

chance overheard, left me no room for doubt, and it is my acquaintance with this circumstance that gave me an influence over Mademoiselle de Montglat, which I endeavoured to use for the success of our—I mean of Monsieur d'Hocquincourt's—enterprise. Your Majesty can now easily comprehend the penetration of the Coadjutor!"

"The treacherous spy!" exclaimed Fabian, in a transport of indignation, which respect for the royal presence could not repress.

The only reply of his brother was a gesture of disdain, as he turned and rejoined the astonished group of courtiers. The Coadjutor was about to speak, but the Queen showed herself so much agitated by what she had just heard, that he feared to draw on himself the wrath about to burst on the head of the unfortunate Countess, who, pale and silent, stood before the Queen, with downcast eyes and trembling limbs, like a timid lamb before an enraged lioness.

"Approach! Mademoiselle, approach!" said Anne of Austria, in a voice so stifled with emotion as to be almost inaudible; "I would fain still doubt the truth of what I have just heard. Tell me that they are mistaken;—tell me that you, whom I loved—you, in whom I placed my full confidence—would never betray me, would never repeat, to a more than doubtful friend—"

She paused for an instant, and then, with an outbreak of passion, stamped on the ground, and exclaimed:

"Tell me so, wretched woman! maintain your innocence, or I will crush you like a worm of the earth!"

The very excess of the royal anger seemed to give to Elizabeth the calm courage of despair; she knelt before the Queen, and replied, in a voice at once gentle and firm:

"I will not aggravate by a falsehood a fault of which I have most bitterly repented: all that the Baron de Croissi has said is too true."

All the fiery passions of the Queen Regent's Spanish soul seemed aroused by these words.

"Thou dardest to avow it?" she cried, in a loud and threatening tone; "thou dardest to speak it aloud—in my presence! Away with thee, detestable creature! away or—"

She raised her hand as she spoke, but suddenly dropping it, she sank back in her chair, and covered her face with her handkerchief.

"Oh! hapless, hapless Queen that I am!" she murmured, amid her half-restrained sobs. "Betrayed by my domestics, my friends, my relatives!"

The effect of this scene on the bye-standers had been almost stunning; no one dared to open his mouth, some restrained by terror, some by