

The mask clutched his hand tighter to prevent his finishing his sentence.

"Act as if I were *he*," he said.

Rastignac then acted like a millionaire on the highroad with a brigand's pistol at his head; he surrendered.

"My dear Count," said he to du Châtelet, to whom he presently returned, "if you care for your position in life, treat Lucien de Rubempré as a man whom you will one day see holding a place far above that where you stand."

The mask made an imperceptible gesture of approbation, and went off in search of Lucien.

"My dear fellow, you have changed your opinion of him very suddenly," replied the Préfet with justifiable surprise.

"As suddenly as men change who belong to the centre and vote with the right," replied Rastignac to the Préfet-Député, whose vote had for a few days failed to support the Ministry.

"Are there such things as opinions nowadays? There are only interests," observed des Lupeaulx, who had heard them. "What is the case in point?"

"The case of the Sieur de Rubempré, whom Rastignac is setting up as a person of consequence," said du Châtelet to the Secretary-General.

"My dear Count," replied des Lupeaulx very seriously, "Monsieur de Rubempré is a young man of the highest merit, and has such good interest at his back that I should be delighted to renew my acquaintance with him."

"There he is, rushing into the wasps' nest of the rakes of the day," said Rastignac.

The three speakers looked towards a corner where a group of recognized wits had gathered, men of more or less celebrity, and several men of fashion. These gentlemen made common stock of their jests, their remarks, and their scandal, trying to amuse themselves till something should amuse them. Among this strangely mingled party were some men with whom Lucien had had transactions, combining ostensibly kind offices with covert false dealing.