

sovereign in all that she has a right to command?"

"Oh! my subjects know very well how to dispense with that duty," returned the Queen, bitterly. "Ask these gentlemen, who know them well, what insults they daily heap on the mother of their King. But," she abruptly added, "let us to business! Young man, you have desired—from a scruple which I honour—to hear the Regent of France give you the order to deliver the state from its most dangerous enemy by every possible means;—that order I now give. Now that you are satisfied, swear to me to fulfil this mission at the peril of your life, and then leave us. Monsieur de Croissi, you will explain to him what is necessary to be done."

All present waited, anxiously, for the decisive reply of Fabian; Elizabeth directed towards him a fixed and haggard gaze, and the Baron, as pale as she, awaited his brother's answer. Fabian, in a firm but respectful tone, broke the profound silence that reigned in the chamber.

"Will your Majesty pardon me," he said, "if, to guard against all misapprehension, I now ask, whether by this dangerous enemy of the state, is really meant the great Condé—the first prince of the blood?"

A low murmur ran through the chamber, and a light colour reddened the cheeks of the Queen.

"And, why not, sir?" she passionately exclaimed; "if he, whom you call the great Condé, is a factious, insolent and ambitious man, a traitor to France and the King? What means such a question as this? Have I been deceived with regard to you—will you refuse to obey your sovereign?" and she struck the ground angrily with her foot.

"My sovereign?" repeated Fabian, who alone of all present seemed unmoved, "is it, indeed, she whom I now behold? Is it, indeed, the grand daughter of Charles V., whom I have just heard? Where are we now? Is it the palace of the Queen of France which we have secretly entered, gliding like thieves through the darkness! Where is the majesty of the throne—where is the Queen? I see here but a woman who meets in secret with nocturnal conspirators, to plot an assassination."

The boldness of these words struck the courtiers with stupor; none could even endeavour to silence the impudent enthusiast.

"Audacious knave!" exclaimed Anne of Austria, in a voice of fierce wrath, as she started from the chair.

Fabian threw himself at her feet.

"Oh! listen to me, my noble sovereign!" he cried, with warm animation. "I am lost and

undone—I know it—but I have made the sacrifice of my life, in order to lay before you the truth which is perhaps concealed from you. The fearful project which you have been counselled to adopt cannot advantage the state. No! say what they will, the blood of the bravest and noblest defender of France ought never to be shed thus treacherously, by an obscure hand. Open, open your eyes, august Queen! Think of your grandfather,—think of your son,—think of the sacredness of the power given you by heaven!"

A convulsive burst of laughter issued from the lips of Anne of Austria.

"Who brought hither this absurd sermoniser?" she demanded, with an expression of keen irony. "Whence comes this presumptuous scholar, who would teach us—us, the Regent of France—morality? Is it some new insult of our enemies? Should it so be, gentlemen! he who has prepared it shall bitterly rue his imprudence."

Then, changing her tone, with the versatility natural to many irascible characters, she abruptly addressed Fabian.

"Thou believest this an assembly of conspirators to plot an assassination! Well! be it so! but knowest thou where this council of conspirators is held? Thou art now in my oratory, in the Palais-Cardinal. Thou knowest me not? Look at me—I am the Queen Regent. These gentlemen—look at them also—they are M. le Tellier, M. de Servien, and M. de Lionne, the secretaries of state; here is M. de Chateaufort, the keeper of the seals, and there the Marshal d'Hocquincourt, general-in-chief of the armies of the King. These form the council of regency—the most zealous defenders of my son Louis. Look at us all—little matters it that thou shouldst know the royal power to be fallen so low, that the Regent and her ministers must conspire in secret, like seditious citizens; that they are reduced to supplicate a country squire like thee, to save the state by a stroke of his dagger."

As she finished, the Queen could no longer control the violence of her emotion, and falling back into her chair, she covered her face with her hands, to conceal the tears that now trickled down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DILEMMA.

THE emotion of the Queen Regent was shared by all those of the council, in whom political intrigue had not destroyed every generous thought, all feeling of pity for the evils under which France then groaned. The Baron profited by this