

tact abandonment that somewhat unnerved me. Was I enveloped, spite of myself, by some mysterious fatality?

"Will you deny, sir!" said M. de Chavigny, smiling, "that you have all power over the Duke of Orleans? Are you not his confidential secretary—his most trusted friend?"

"I am proud to say it—I am."

"Has he not given you apartments near his own, in the ducal palace?"

"All this is public and well-known."

"And since when have you been attached to the service of his Highness?"

"About four years, M. de Chavigny!"

"Good progress to make in four years!" observed the Cardinalist. "What say you, M. de Fontrailles, and you, M. de Montresor! Are you not envious of the favor of your friend the Marquis?"

Neither answered a word. I could restrain myself no longer, and in an irritated tone I addressed the Cardinal's secretary—

"Have done with this foolery, sir! What are you aiming at?"

"Aiming at!" repeated one of the toppers near him, ere he could reply; "at a very pretty bird—the harbinger of spring—ha! ha! ha!"

I fixed my eyes sternly on the man, and demanded an explanation, but he had his head down again on the table and was fast asleep in a few moments. A thousand suspicions darted through my brain. I seized the arm of Laubardemont and shook it violently.

"Is it to drunkenness that I am also to ascribe your former loquacity and present silence?"

"No!" he replied, coolly and dispassionately; "I am ready to proceed. *Monsieur*, it would seem, bears you much favor and affection—but why?"

"Why!" I rejoined with warmth; "because he knows that in me he possesses a loyal and devoted follower; because every boon of his is reckoned up in my heart; because I will never prove traitor to his cause, and would give my life to save him from danger! Is there any one here present who doubts this?"

My sincere and energetic words seemed to make some impression on M. de Chavigny; but any friends remained silent, and the other Cardinalists continued their jibes and laughter.

"Fine loyalty and devotion!" echoed one.

"Better paid than *Monsieur* generally pays his debts," cried another.

"Honour makes men clear-sighted, M. de Cossé!" said a third; "but courtly favor quickly shuts their mouths."

## XVII.

## MELCHIOR'S STORY:—THE CLOSE.

Amidst these sarcasms I measured the Cardinalists with my eye, wishing that all had but one heart and one form, that I might with one word return all their insults and with one blow avenged them. The gentlemen of *Monsieur's* suite rose, and half drew their swords from the scabbards, ready to assist me with their weapons, though they had failed me in speech. I felt as if my brain were seared by a red-hot iron. A strange suspicion began to insinuate itself into my mind, hitherto so frank and confiding. At this terrible doubt, which I made an effort to repulse as something too base and criminal for reality, I made an authoritative gesture to calm the surrounding tempest, and in a voice choked with conflicting emotion, I addressed M. de Chavigny—

"I adjure you by your honor, sir! to tell me the truth. Do not deceive me—I await my sentence from your lips."

"*Marquis de Cossé!*" replied the friend of the Cardinal, who seemed touched by my evident agitation, "I have been deceived, and I openly acknowledge your honor and rectitude, for hypocrisy could never imitate the anguish now depicted in your countenance."

"That is nought to the purpose!" I exclaimed hoarsely; "be frank and sincere! Tell me with what crime I am charged—of what dishonour I am suspected;—accuse me—defame me—only speak, and speak plainly!"

"I will, M. de Cossé!" he answered. "Myself and all my friends believed, till this moment, that you were but netting a part, and that you knew—as well as ourselves—as well as the whole Court—"

"Finish, sir!" I breathlessly ejaculated.

"That the Marchioness de Cossé is the mistress of the Duke of Orleans!"

At these terrible words my limbs tottered under me, my eyes closed and I clutched at the table to prevent me from falling. I muttered almost unconsciously. "A sword! a sword!" searching in vain for the weapon which Villeneuve had just detached from my girdle. At last, by a violent effort, I recovered myself, and casting a glance of animosity among the assembled guests—

"You have lied—the whole of you!" I cried; "it is an infamous falsehood!"

At the same moment a stranger—who had entered the hall of the hostility a few minutes before, without any attention being paid to him amidst the clamour—advanced to Chavigny and struck him in the face with his glove. The Car-