

respect. For a few moments nothing was heard in the oratory but the sobs of the weeping Queen. The plaintive voice of Elizabeth alone dared to mingle with these tokens of the royal grief.

"Madame!" she cried, "my crime is so great that I can neither expect nor hope pardon from your august clemency; notwithstanding, let me be permitted to explain, if not to excuse, my treason towards your Majesty. Deprived of my aunt, an orphan, alone in the world, I had no one to look to for support and advice, save the noble lady who had procured my admission among your maids of honour. I owed her boundless gratitude, for to her I owed my place near you, and could only hope to retain it so long as I received her countenance. You know the Duchess de Chevreuse; she is haughty and imperious, as well as profoundly versed in the art of searching out the truth amid the most secret recesses of the heart. Was it then very difficult for her to deceive a simple and inexperienced girl, who, for the most part, understood not the sense or importance of the words and actions of which they made her give account? Besides, I thought her thoroughly devoted to your Majesty, and was led by her words to believe that I only revealed to her what had already been confided by yourself. My eyes were only opened on the day when Monsieur de Croissi, having overheard a conversation between the Duchess and myself, made me aware of the odious part I had been made to play. I was overwhelmed with shame and fear, and that man who has just accused me, took advantage of my unfortunate position to make me a tool for his ambitious purposes; he threatened to disclose all to your Majesty, unless I consented to assist him in a design which he then projected, and in which he wished a young man, over whom he supposed me to have some influence, to take part. What could I do? I would rather have died than be deprived of your confidence and shamefully driven from the court; besides, I was assured that the project had your Majesty's sanction. I accepted his offer, therefore, and Heaven knows the tears which this hateful bargain has since cost me. I have now told you the whole truth, Madame, and am ready to undergo any punishment which your just indignation may assign me. Life itself is a burden under the misfortunes which have poured upon me within the last few hours, and should your Majesty think my fault deserves death—I am ready."

This recital, bearing the stamp of undisguised truth, and uttered in a touching and plaintive tone, made a deep impression on some of the courtiers. The Coadjutor turned aside, as if to

conceal his emotion. Fabian drew near to Elizabeth, and said to her in a low voice:

"This, then, was your secret, my poor friend! The same man has proved the ruin of us both. Ah! Elizabeth! Elizabeth! how fatal has the court proved to us! Would that we had remained poor and obscure in the rural shades of Montglat!"

During the time that the young Countess had been speaking, the Queen had gradually grown calmer, although, perhaps, she had not heard a word of the frank explanation then given. She rose suddenly, and with a pre-occupied air, as if just roused from slumber, she said to her councillors:

"What think ye, gentlemen, of an evening so well employed for the good of the State? In truth, we have passed it in discussing the love affairs of a country squire, and a waiting-woman! But enough—and too much—of all this! Gentlemen, I will not detain you longer; the enterprise we assembled to deliberate upon must now be renounced. The Coadjutor will remain, as I have somewhat to say to him."

As she said this she made a gesture of dismissal, without considering that she had not yet decided on the fate of the two young people who had incurred her resentment. Such was the fickle and changeable character of Anne of Austria, that this forgetfulness, caused by her anxiety as to more important matters, might have saved the culprits; but too many of those present were interested in an immediate decision to allow this lapse of memory to pass. None moved. The Baron de Croissi undertook to express their wishes and his own.

"Madame!" said he, with a low reverence, "these gentlemen, before leaving your gracious presence, await the orders of your Majesty as to this young man, on whom their security so much depends."

"True!" replied the Queen, and her countenance grew darker at the recollection. "But retire in all security, my friends! I will charge Monsieur de Croissi to provide for the safety of all. You may be sure," she added, with a look of contempt towards the Baron, "that he will not be too indulgent to his rash pupil."

One after another the courtiers respectfully saluted the Queen and retired in silence. Marshal d'Hocquincourt made another effort to save Fabian, but was abruptly silenced by the Regent, and he withdrew, casting a compassionate glance on the young De Croissi. The Queen then called the Baron to her, and commenced a conversation with him in low and cautious tones.