

of Orleans shall not enter unannounced. You will find it larger than it looks to be. It contains a parlor, sitting and dining rooms, a library opening on the garden ; a bed-room, three chambers for servants, and two anterooms, large enough to accommodate your worshippers while they await admission to your presence. This is all I have to offer my lady of the bedchamber. May I hope that it is agreeable ?”

“Agreeable !” exclaimed Laura, affectionately. “It will place me on a pinnacle of happiness. And now that I have heard of all the favors, the privileges, and the honors that are to accrue to me from my residence in the pavilion, will my gracious mistress deign to instruct me as to the duties I am to perform, in return for her bounty ?”

“Wilful creature, have I not already told you ? On occasions of state you are to be one of my trainbearers ; and when his majesty comes to visit me, you station yourself at my side. Then you are to drive out with me daily, and as you alone will be with me in the carriage, we can have many a pleasant chat, while the maids of honor come behind. And we must be discreet, or they may inform monsieur of the preference which madame has for her lady of the bedchamber ; and then, Heaven knows what the duke might do to us ! Let us hope that he would not poison you, as he did my poor little Italian greyhound, a few weeks ago. He hated the dog because I loved it, and because it was a present to me from my dear brother Carl. So be wary and prudent, Laura : these maids of honor have sharp ears, and it is not safe to talk when they are waiting in the anteroom, for some are in the pay of De Maintenon, and you will not have been here many days before one of them is sold to your father. I can scarcely believe in the reality of my new acquisition, for much as I regret to tell you so, Laura, you cannot enter my service until Monsieur Louvois comes hither to make the request himself. Otherwise, monsieur and Madame de Maintenon would spread it about, that I had forcibly abducted the Marchioness de Bonaletta, and torn her from her loving father’s arms.”

“My father will be here to-day to comply with all the formalities that must precede my installation,” replied Laura. “And, if your highness will admit him, I shall

have the happiness of being in your train at the court-ball to-night.”

“Of course I must admit him, since you will it, my queen of hearts. By what magic is it that you have won my love so completely to-day, Laura ?”

“By the magic touch of my own heart that loves you so well, dear lady—so well, that I ask no other boon of Heaven but that of deserving and returning your affection.”

“Until some lover comes between us, and robs me of my treasure,” said the duchess, with a smile. “Have you seen the brigand yet ? Do you know him ?”

Laura laughed. “He is a myth—I have no faith in his existence,” said she.

“He exists, nevertheless, my child, and will make his appearance before long ; for you are destined to have many suitors.”

“But none that approaches my ideal of manhood. Where shall I find this hero of my dreams ?—not at the court of France, your highness. But—should he ever come out of the clouds, brave, noble, wise, as I have pictured him, then, oh then ! I should follow the destiny of woman ; leaving all other beings, even my gracious mistress herself, to cleave unto him, and merge my soul in his ! Were I to love, the world itself would recede from view, leaving all space filled with the image of the man I loved ! Better he should never come down from the moon—for, if he comes, I am lost !”

## CHAPTER V.

### THE COURT-BALL.

THE magnificent halls of the Louvre were open to receive the guests of his majesty Louis XIV. Balls were “few and far between” at the French court, and the festivities of the evening were significant, as betokening triumph to De Montespan and mortification to De Maintenon.

For Louis, like Mohammed’s coffin, was suspended between

the heaven of De Maintenon's pious attractions, and the earth of De Montespan's carnal fascinations. Neither the exhortations of Père la Chaise, nor the affectionate zeal of De Maintenon, had as yet overthrown the power of De Montespan ; and more than once, when wearied with the solemn dulness of the former, had he sought refuge from drowsiness in the rollicking companionship of the latter, who, if she *was* a sinner, wore the livery of her master, and sinned honestly and above-board. De Montespan always profited by these little intervals of tenderness, to obtain some signal favor from Louis, which had the effect of perplexing the court, and rendering it a doubtful matter to those who would fain have gone over to the victorious party, which of his two mistresses was truly sovereign of the king's unstable affections.

Such a concession was this ball, wrung from Louis, first by coaxing, and finally by pouting and tears. De Montespan was elated, for it was a double triumph ; it was given at her request, and was to take place on her birthday.

And De Maintenon, of course, was proportionally crest-fallen. But, after shedding just as many tears as she deemed appropriate, Scarron's widow was clever enough to understand that wisdom lay in acquiescence. She wiped her eyes, and suffered herself to be caressed into a good-humor ; was more amiable, more sprightly, more fascinating than ever, with not a trace of disappointment in her looks, save that which lay in the unusual paleness of her face.

Louis was so touched by her magnanimity, that he absolutely begged her pardon ; and she was so overcome by the condescension of his majesty, that she asked permission to be present at the ball.

"He was only too happy!" that is to say, he did his best to conceal his consternation at the unheard-of proposition. Sainte Maintenon at a ball! What would she do in so unrighteous a place? And worse—still worse: what would his other charmer say when she heard of it? What outbreak of indignation might not be expected, when De Montespan was told that her ex-governess was to be present at a ball given in her own honor? Between his saint and his sinner, Louis was sorely perplexed. But he might have spared himself all un-



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easiness. De Montespan was not in the least ruffled at the tidings ; she rather enjoyed the idea of setting off her own splendor against the shabbiness of her rival.

But the court was in a state of anxious excitement on the subject. Everybody was dying of curiosity to see the meeting of the rivals, and the effect that was to be produced by their presence on the poor deserted queen.

To which of the favorites will the king throw his handkerchief ? With which of the two will he converse most ? Will he feel at ease as he treads the minuet under the eyes of the devotee ? Or will he venture to recognize *her* in presence of the courtesan ?

Such were the questions that were continually asked, but never answered by the elegant crowd which thronged the halls of the palace that evening. The rencontre of Eugene and Barbesieur was for the moment forgotten. It was not likely that either one of the disputants would venture to appear at court, until the king had decided to which party belonged the blame of the affray ; but, as regarded the brush that was imminent between the king's mistresses, that was a matter which concerned everybody, and everybody was in a flutter to know the result.

The lord chamberlain having announced that the court was about to make its entrance, the throng pressed forward to the Gallery of Apollo. Four immense chandeliers lit up the gorgeous frescoes on the ceiling, and poured a flood of radiance upon the line of stately courtiers and elegant women who were the guests of the king's leman that night. The ladies coquetted with their large fans, whispered with the cavaliers close by, and dispensed smiles and bewitching glances upon those who were too far for speech until the master of ceremonies flung open the doors, and announced "his majesty the king."

There was at once profound silence ; and in a moment every head was bent, and every eye sought the floor. The men bowed low, the women courtesied lower, and nothing was to be seen but a chaos of jewels, velvet, brocade, and llama, surmounted by feathered, flowered, or ringleted heads, and long, flowing wigs.

The one personage who had the right to hold himself erect in the presence of this reverential multitude—the king—appeared, followed by a glittering train of marshals, chamberlains, officers of the royal household, and pages. His majesty traversed the gallery and approached the throne, which, for this festive occasion, was hung with white velvet, studded with golden lilies. Not far from the royal arm-chair stood a lady, whose sad eyes looked wearily upon the pageant, and whose pallid lips had long since forgotten how to smile. It was Maria Theresa, the queen. She had made her entry before the king, but it had scarcely been remarked. She was a deserted wife, and, being without influence at court, had no favors to bestow. She was, therefore, altogether *sans conséquence*.

Nevertheless, she was the queen-consort, and Louis, extending his hand, and inclining his royal head, assisted her to mount the throne. As soon as the kingly pair were seated, his majesty's voice was heard—

"My guests are welcome."

As if by enchantment, feathers, flowers, and wigs, all rose up out of chaos, and every eye was turned upon the handsome person of the sovereign.

While all this had been going on Eugene of Savoy stood erect, nor once cast down his flashing eyes before the lighting of the royal presence. He had entered quietly, had retired to the recess of a window, and, as the crowd had simultaneously become a heap of garments, he had curled his lip in contempt. Suddenly his eye grew soft, and his mouth relaxed into a smile. Not far from the throne he had seen one head—one beautiful head, and had met the glance of a pair of glorious eyes, which were quietly surveying the scene, and, as Eugene thought, enjoying it with an expression of suppressed amusement.

Who could she be, that, while every other person there had lost his individuality and merged it into one monstrous concretion of obsequiousness, had preserved her balance, and stood undazzled by the rays of the sun of France? As young as she was lovely, whence came the mingled self-possession and unconsciousness which made her an observer instead of a

worshipper? Eugene had never seen this beautiful creature before; but from the depths of her starry eyes there streamed a light that went straight to his heart, making strange revelation of some half-forgotten bliss which, in an anterior state of being, might once have been his own.

But how came she hither? What had her fair, unclouded brow, her innocent face, her maidenly bearing in common with the vain, voluptuous, and corrupt women around, who were so lost to shame as not only to do homage to the king's mistresses, but to envy them the infamous distinction of his preference?

Their eyes met; and in her glance of astonishment Eugene fancied that he saw mirrored his own surprise at her extraordinary defiance of courtly servility. She too seemed to ask, "How is it that you stand so proudly erect, when every other head is bent in reverence before our sovereign? Who are you, that presume to—"

But the king and his suite passed between them, and the beautiful face was lost to sight. In its place, Eugene beheld the haughty monarch who had caused such bitter tears to flow from the eyes of his dear, exiled mother; and the thought of that beloved mother led to remembrance of his father's death, and to the tyranny which would make of his father's son an unwilling priest.

Meanwhile the king had seated himself on the throne, and the princes and princesses of the blood had approached to pay their homage. Not a sound was heard in that splendid gallery, save the subdued tones of Louis, who was conversing with the Duke of Orleans; for, until the former rose to make his *grande tournée*, etiquette required of his adoring subjects to be dumb.

A slight hum, however, began to be heard at the lower end of the hall, and all eyes were turned toward the door which opened to admit the woman whom the king delighted to honor.

Her tall figure was set off to great advantage by a dress of purple velvet, embroidered with silver. From her voluptuous shoulders drooped a mantle, edged with richest ermine; and her swelling bust was scarcely concealed by a drapery of sil-

vered gauze. On her bosom she wore a fleur de lis composed of emeralds, pearls, and diamonds, and on her magnificent brow glittered a diadem of brilliants worthy the acceptance of an empress.

So haughty was her bearing, and so obsequious were the salutations which greeted her entrance, that but for the pale statue that occupied a seat next the king, Madame de Montespan might have been mistaken for the queen.

Eugene's eyes had sought and found the young girl, whose sweet vision had been displaced by the king, but who now, in full view of the company, stood immediately behind the chair of the Duchess of Orleans. Would *she* bow her incomparable head before that exalted harlot? Would *she* outrage her maidenhood by acknowledgment of De Montespan's title to consideration? No! Thank God, she was true to her pure, womanly instincts. Her face crimsoned, her delicate brows were slightly drawn together, and her head was unconsciously raised, as if in protest against the public scandal of this woman's intrusion.

When Eugene saw this, his heart leaped with joy, and he yearned to throw himself at her feet.

"In Heaven's name who can she be, that fairy-queen, who fears not mortal man?" thought he. "Who—"

But suddenly his eye shot fire, and the expression of his face was transformed. He had met the glance of Barbesieur Louvois, who, under shelter of De Montespan's favor with Louis, and the protection of his father, had intruded himself into the company of the proudest nobles in France. How was it possible that the master of ceremonies had allowed to a disgraced man the privilege of appearing before the king and queen?

"Gracious Heaven!" thought Eugene, "are honor and shame but empty words? Is this, indeed, the Marchioness de Montespan, whose entrance is greeted like that of a sovereign, while the Countess de Soissons wanders in foreign lands, a fugitive from justice? Justice?—No! A fugitive from oppression, and the kinsman who should have protected her—her oppressor! And is yonder swaggering cavalier the caitiff whose back is smarting with the lash of my hunting-whip?"

And those smiling courtiers there, who take him by the hand—are they the noblemen that upheld me in the act? By Heaven, they greet him as though, like me, his veins were blue with the blood of kings! But no!—not all! The Princes of Conti have refused to recognize him: they bow to the minister of war, but pass without a word to his son. For that act I shall hold them 'in my heart of hearts,' nor forget their manliness while I live to honor worth and scorn servility!"

Eugene looked affectionately at his cousins, until his eyes filled with tears of gratitude; but they were unconscious of the comfort they had ministered to his wounded heart, for they were not aware of his presence in the ballroom.

The king had not yet ended his long conversation with the Duke of Orleans. The company stood still and expectant, and the Marchioness de Montespan began to exhibit signs of impatience. She had hoped that the ceremonial of compliments to and from the royal family would have been over before her entrance; and now that she had been there fully ten minutes, the king seemed as unconscious of her presence as ever.

But—thank Heaven! the colloquy was at an end; the king has risen, and has signified to the queen that the princesses of the blood may rise also. He descends from his throne, and De Montespan's heart is wild with joy. The moment of her triumph approaches; Louis is about to lead her out for the minuet, and so proclaim her queen of the festival. She smiles ineffably; in her eagerness, she almost rises from her tabouret to meet him, but—what can he intend to do? Has he not seen her?—He turns away, and—now he extends his hand to another!

De Montespan was perfectly overwhelmed, and, all etiquette forgetting, she actually rose from her seat and took a step forward, that she might see who was the person that had been so singularly honored by the king.

Who was it? Why, nobody but Sainte Maintenon, who, without pomp or parade, had entered the room, and had taken her tabouret with as much simplicity as she would have seated herself in church.

Her toilet, as well as her demeanor, presented a singular contrast with that of her sparkling rival. Her dress was of

dark velvet, buttoned up to the throat. Her wealth of beautiful black hair was fastened up with a barbe of gossamer lace, and the only ornament she wore around her neck was a delicate gold chain, to which was attached a miniature of Louis set in superb brilliants.

And upon this wearisome, insipid, old-fashioned puppet, the King of France had bestowed his attentions. De Montespan would have given her diadem to have been permitted to vent her humiliation in tears; but pride restrained her, while she looked on, and saw how the king led De Maintenon to the queen, an honor hitherto reserved for princesses of the blood. And with what feline humility she knelt and pressed her majesty's hands to her unholy lips! Oh! De Montespan could have taken her life when she saw this!

And she—she for whom this gay assemblage were called together, sat unnoticed and alone; her expected triumph, defeat—every hope she had cherished of love reciprocated, and ambition gratified, transformed into despair, by one little act. The king had given his hand to her rival!

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE LADY OF THE BEDCHAMBER.

THE conversation between the king, the queen, and Madame de Maintenon, was long and interesting. When she saw the former rise and incline his head, De Montespan's heart fluttered with expectation; but his majesty stopped before the Duchess of Orleans, and there he lingered so long that everybody wondered what could be the attraction there. Presently Elizabeth-Charlotte turned to the young girl who stood beside her, and presented her to the king. How beautiful she was! How enchanting her smile, how charming her blushes!

She was evidently a stranger, and De Montespan set her down as an enemy, for she had not complied with the customs of the court, by which every lady introduced there was ex-

pected to leave a card for the mistress of the king. An enemy, then, she must be—perchance, a rival! But who was she?

"Yes, who is she?" thought Prince Eugene, as, transfixed with admiration, he gazed upon her lovely face. "I *must* know," exclaimed he aloud, while he pressed forward to make the inquiry.

There was no one near to whom he could address himself, for he now for the first time remarked that he stood quite alone. He began to be aware that his friends were shy and kept aloof; but Eugene had come to this ball to prove that the son of the Countess de Soissons was not to be browbeaten by king or courtier; and he went on and on until he stood so near to Louis that he could look him full in the eye.

The *grand monarque* knit his brows, and presumed that the Prince of Savoy would understand the hint, and withdraw; but Eugene paid no attention to the Olympic frown, or affected not to see it.

Louis, who had been chatting with the little Duke of Maine, strode angrily forward and addressed the prince:

"I judge from your eyes, little abbé, that you have come hither to ask some favor of us to-night?"

"Then my eyes belie my purpose, your majesty," replied Eugene, quietly. "I have no favor to ask of any one."

"I understand," said the king, slightly raising his shoulders. "You have come for an answer to your last petition?"

"Pardon me, sire, I have presented no petition whatever to your majesty."

"If you have not, your mother, the Countess de Soissons, has presented one for you. She begged me, not long ago, to appoint you prebendary of a cathedral: as she has thought proper to abscond from my dominions, I have had no opportunity of answering her request. When you write to her, you can tell her that it is refused. Prince Eugene of Savoy leads too worldly a life to deserve promotion in the church. Bullies are not apt to distinguish themselves as ecclesiastics."

"Sire, I thank your majesty; for the sentiments to which you have just given utterance release me from further obligation to enter upon a career for which I have neither inclination nor calling."

To these bold words Louis vouchsafed no answer. He annihilated the offender with a glance, and passed on. Then turning to the Duke of Orleans, he said in a voice that was intended to be generally heard, "I cannot imagine what that little abbé of Savoy wants here to-night. His face brings me bad luck."\*

This was enough to damn Eugene forever at the French court. It was the *anathema maranatha* of his sovereign, and cast him out from association with all loyal subjects. Nobody in those vast halls would have been seen in his vicinity; his best friends would not now have ventured one look of sympathy or kindness toward a nobleman so publicly and pointedly insulted by royalty. He was henceforth a proscribed man.

The Princes de Conti were sorely grieved, but they dared, no more than their compeers, risk the displeasure of the king by upholding their outraged kinsman. The eldest one, however, managed to whisper a word or two in passing.

"Dear Eugene," said he, "do be reasonable, and put an end to this abominable scene by going home. Our hearts are all with you, but we dare not affront the king by the smallest demonstration on your behalf; he is looking out for it, and would revenge himself effectually. We went this morning with De la Roche Guyon to Louvois, and obtained his sacred promise to ignore your difficulty with his son, and allow it to be settled between yourselves. But he has evidently not kept his word; for the affair has been misrepresented to the king, and the insult you have received is a proof of it. Go away for a few weeks until it blows over, and all will have been forgotten."

"I have no desire to have my affairs forgotten; I trust that they may be remembered," replied Eugene. "But hark! the music.—We are to have the ineffable privilege of seeing the king dance. Doubtless you have already secured a partner, and I will not detain you."

The music was heard, and his majesty went through the usual form of requesting the queen to open the ball. She answered, as she was expected to do, that her health was too

\* The king's own words.—See "Memoirs of the Duke de St. Simon," vol. x

feeble for her to enjoy dancing, and she hoped his majesty would excuse her, and find another partner.

This was always a time of suspense and excitement at court-balls; for the lady who was then selected by the king was, *de facto*, the queen of the festival. The minuet's enticing measure was calling upon its votaries to commence; but, until the king had made his choice, no one could stir.

Madame de Montespan's heart began to throb anew with hope. This time she was sure of being chosen, for De Maintenon did not dance; and, after all, what signified a few words with the queen, compared with the glory of being led out to the dance by the king?

Her eyes sparkled with animation, her mouth began to ripple with happy smiles, and oh! triumph and joy! the king was seen coming in that direction.

But again he stopped to speak with the Duchess of Orleans. What could he want of her? If De Montespan had been within hearing, she need not have wondered, for Louis merely requested the pleasure of her hand for the dance.

Elizabeth-Charlotte looked up in astonishment.

"I hope I have not fallen into disfavor," said Louis, answering the look. "You are not about to refuse me?"

"Oh, sire," replied his sister-in-law, laughing, "I am merely overcome with your condescension. But your majesty knows," continued she, seriously, "that since my father's death I have never danced. I was enjoying myself in this very hall while he was expiring at home; and from that unhappy day I have never desired to dance again. Moreover, I am a miserable partner, and you would be ashamed of me."

"How ashamed?" asked Louis, amused at his sister-in-law's artlessness.

"I mean, sire, that strive as I will, I am always behind-hand in a dance. I am like the snail, who, being invited to a wedding, arrived there a year after, and found herself the first guest that had come to the christening. As she entered the garden she fell into a ha-ha, whereupon she said, 'More haste, worse speed.'"

Louis laughed heartily. "Then I am refused, dear sister," said he, "and I must acquiesce in your decision. But I must

have satisfaction for the affront. You must find a substitute."

"A substitute!" exclaimed the duchess, reddening with anger, as she fancied she saw the king's eyes wander to the tabouret whereon De Montespan still waited and smiled. "Surely, your majesty would not ask of me—"

"Why not?" cried Louis, enjoying her perplexity. "Why may I not ask you to procure me a substitute of your own selection? It is not much for you to do—is it?"

As he spoke, the eyes of the king rested unequivocally upon an object which he perceived just behind the chair of the duchess. She understood, and hastened to repair her blunder.

"Sire," said she "may I ask of your majesty a favor? My new lady of the bedchamber has just arrived in Paris, where she is a perfect stranger. "Will you be so gracious as to give her this proof of your royal favor? She is not only my favorite attendant, but the daughter of your majesty's minister of war, and—"

"And she is, above all things, herself—the beautiful Marchioness de Bonaletta," interrupted the king, with somewhat of his youthful courtliness and grace. "You propose her as your substitute, do you not?"

"Yes, sire—if your majesty is so good."

"So good! I shall esteem myself most happy in the acquisition of so charming a partner. Does the Marchioness de Bonaletta consent?"

With these words, Louis offered his hand: and Laura, without embarrassment or presumption, accepted the honor conferred upon her, and was led out to the dance. A murmur of admiration followed her appearance, but she seemed quite unconscious of the impression she had made. Her lovely countenance was neither lit up by pride, nor suffused by bashfulness. Her cheeks were slightly flushed by natural modesty, and her sweet, unaffected bearing enhanced her incomparable beauty of person.

Even De Montespan herself could not withhold her tribute of admiration. At first she had darted glances of hatred toward an imaginary rival; but a calm survey of Laura's pure and angelic expression of face reassured her. This girl had

no mind to entrap the king, and if Louis had not courage enough to dance with *her* (De Montespan), in presence of that canting hypocrite De Maintenon, perhaps it was quite as well that he had provided himself with a partner *sans coquetterie*, and therefore *sans conséquence*.

Madame de Maintenon, too, had remarked Laura, as, gracefully emerging from her concealment behind the seat of the duchess, she had unostentatiously accepted the king's invitation to dance.

"What a union of tact with tenderness of heart is apparent in all that his majesty does," said she to the Duke de Maine, who was standing beside her. "This young girl is the personification of innocence and purity, and his majesty's selection of her as his partner proves that he not only desires to pay homage to youth and beauty, but also to virtue and modesty."

"How beautiful she is!" murmured a young cavalier, who, with Barbesieur Louvois, was watching the dancers.

"Why do you sigh?" replied Barbesieur. "You ought rather to be proud of your future bride."

"My future bride!" echoed he, dolefully. "I would she were, my dear friend. But although your father has so graciously given his consent, I am as far from obtaining her as ever."

"It you wait for that," whispered Barbesieur in return, "you may wait until the day of judgment. My sister is one of those incomprehensible beings that loves opposition for opposition's sake. If she is disdainful, it is precisely because she is quite as much enamored of you as you are of her. She is a sort of chaste Artemis who is ashamed of her preference for a man, and would die rather than confess it."

"She enchants me at one moment, and drives me to despair the next," sighed the marquis.

"No need for despair," was the reply. "My dear marquis," continued Barbesieur, coming close to the ear of the Italian, "what will you give me if I promise that you shall become her husband?"

The eyes of the marquis glowed with desire, and his swarthy face was tinged with red. "What would I give?" cried he,

as he caught a glimpse of Laura on the dance. "The half of my fortune, the half of my life, if, with one half of either, I might call her mine!"

"Nay," said Barbesieur, with a sinister laugh, "I am neither robber nor devil. I wish neither your fortune nor your soul in exchange for my wares. Laura is so headstrong, that she will have to be forced into happiness, and made to take what even now she is longing to snatch. So if I make you both happy, you will not then object to giving me a few of the crumbs that fall from your table?"

"I will give you any thing you desire, and my eternal gratitude to boot, if you will help me to become possessor of that angel."

"I am passionately fond of hunting, and the Marchioness de Bonaletta has the most tempting bit of woods that ever made a hunter's heart ache to call it his. Now if you marry Laura, you become her guardian, and have absolute power over her property."

"I care nothing for her property," cried the marquis, passionately. "Her beauty, her sweetness, and her noble birth, are wealth enough for me. In the golden book of Venice the name of the richest noble there inscribed is the Strozzi."

"Everybody knows that, dear marquis, and therefore you will not refuse the reward I claim from my sister's own possessions. 'Tis but meet that she make a present to her brother on her wedding-day. So, then, we understand each other: immediately after the ceremony of your marriage, you make out a deed by which you relinquish to me the usufruct of the Bonaletta estates in Savoy for life. Who gets them after me, I care not."

"I consent; and add thereunto a yearly pension of one thousand ducats. Does that content you?"

"Your liberality is really touching. A thousand ducats to boot! They will fall like a refreshing shower into a purse that is always as empty as the sieves of the Danaïdes. It is a bargain. You wed Laura Bonaletta, and I get her estates, and one thousand ducats a year."

"Here is my hand."

"And mine. In one month you shall both be on your way to Venice; you a happy bridegroom, and she—your bride."

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE LADY OF THE BEDCHAMBER.

THE dance was over, and the king reconducted Laura to her chaperone. "My dear sister," said he, "the fascinations of the partner you selected for me are almost enough to reconcile one to a refusal from yourself. I am convinced that I have been the envy of every cavalier present. I withdraw, therefore, that I may not stand in the way of the fair Laura's admirers."

And gracefully saluting his partner, the royal flirt betook himself at last to poor De Montespan, who had tact enough to smother her chagrin, and give him a cordial reception. It was better to be noticed late than never.

"Your highness," whispered Laura, bending over the back of the duchess's chair, "pray command me not to dance any more. Do you see that swarthy, sinister face over there, close to Barbesieur? It is the Marquis de Strozzi staring at me already. He is about to come hither, and if you do not assist me I shall have to dance with him."

"Never fear, darling," whispered the duchess in return. "They shall not rob me of you so soon. Take your place, and, being on duty, no one can claim you, were it the wild hunter himself."

Laura hastened to resume her station, and, in doing so, glanced toward the window, where stood the pale young man whom she had noticed before. Their eyes met again, and again she blushed. Laura bent her head, and, feigning to arrange a displaced ringlet on the head of her mistress, she said, in low, earnest tones: "Pardon me, gracious mistress; but will you tell me who is that young cavalier in the recess of the window opposite?"

"Certainly, my dear," replied the duchess in the same tone