

Memoirs of Madame de Montespan — Volume 4 eBook

Memoirs of Madame de Montespan — Volume 4

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Being the Historic Memoirs of the Court of Louis XIV.

BOOK 4.

CHAPTER XLIX.

President de Nesmond.—Melladoro.—A Complacent Husband and His Love-sick Wife.
—Tragic Sequel.

President de Nesmond—upright, clear-headed magistrate as he was—was of very great service to me at the Courts of Justice. He always managed to oblige me and look after my interests and my rights in any legal dispute of mine, or when I had reason to fear annoyance on the part of my husband.

I will here relate the grief that his young wife caused him, and it will be seen that, by the side of this poor President, M. de Montespan might count himself lucky. Having long been a widower, he was in some measure accustomed to this state, until love laid a snare for him just at the age of sixty-five.

In the garden that lay below his windows—a garden owned by his neighbour, a farmer—he saw Clorinde. She was this yeoman's only daughter. He at once fell passionately in love with her, as David once loved Bathsheba.

The President married Clorinde, who was very pleased to have a fine name and a title. But her husband soon saw—if not with surprise, at least with pain—that his wife did not love him. A young and handsome Spaniard, belonging to the Spanish Legation, danced one day with Clorinde; to her he seemed as radiant as the god of melody and song. She lost her heart, and without further delay confessed to him this loss.

On returning home, the President said to his youthful consort, “Madame, every one is noticing and censuring your imprudent conduct; even the young Spaniard himself finds it compromising.”

“Nothing you say can please me more,” she replied, “for this proves that he is aware of my love. As he knows this, and finds my looks to his liking, I hope that he will wish to see me again.”

Soon afterwards there was a grand ball given at the Spanish Embassy. Madame de Nesmond managed to secure an invitation, and went with one of her cousins. The young Spaniard did the honours of the evening, and showed them every attention.

As the President was obliged to attend an all-night sitting at the Tourelle,—[The parliamentary criminal court.]—and as these young ladies did not like going home



alone,—for their residence was some way off,—the young Spaniard had the privilege of conducting them to their coach and of driving back with them. After cards and a little music, they had supper about daybreak; and when the President returned, at five o'clock, he saw Melladoro, to whom he was formally introduced by madame.

The President's welcome was a blend of surprise, anger, forced condescension, and diplomatic politeness. All these shades of feeling were easily perceived by the Spaniard, who showed not a trace of astonishment. This was because Clorinde's absolute sway over her husband was as patent as the fact that, in his own house, the President was powerless to do as he liked.

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Melladoro, who was only twenty years old, thought he had made a charming conquest. He asked to be allowed to present his respects occasionally, when Clorinde promptly invited him to do so, in her husband's name as well as in her own.

It was now morning, and he took leave of the ladies. Two days after this he reappeared; then he came five or six times a week, until at last it was settled that a place should be laid for him every day at the President's table.

That year it was M. de Nesmond's turn to preside at the courts during vacation-time. He pleaded urgent motives of health, which made it imperative for him to have country air and complete rest. Another judge consented to forego his vacation and take his place on the bench for four months; so M. de Nesmond was able to leave Paris.

When the time came to set out by coach, madame went off into violent hysterics; but the magistrate, backed up by his father-in-law, showed firmness, and they set out for the Chateau de Nesmond, about thirty leagues from Paris.

M. de Nesmond found the country far from enjoyable. His wife, who always sat by herself in her dressing-gown and seldom consented to see a soul, on more than one occasion left her guests at table in order to sulk and mope in her closet.

She fell ill. During her periods of suffering and depression, she continually mentioned the Spaniard's name. Failing his person, she desired to have his portrait. Alarmed at his wife's condition, the President agreed to write a letter himself to the author of all this trouble, who soon sent the lady a handsome sweetmeat-box ornamented with his crest and his portrait.

At the sight of this, Clorinde became like another woman. She had her hair dressed and put on a smart gown, to show the portrait how deeply enamoured she was of the original.

"Monsieur," she said to her husband, "I am the only daughter of a wealthy man, who, when he gave me to a magistrate older than himself, did not intend to sacrifice me. You have been young, no doubt, and you, therefore, ought to know how revolting to youth, all freshness and perfume, are the cuddlings and caresses of decrepitude. As yet I do not detest you, but it is absolutely impossible to love you. On the contrary, I am in love with Melladoro; perhaps in your day you were as attractive as he is, and knew how to make the most of what you then possessed. Now, will you please me by going back to Paris? I shall be ever so grateful to you if you will. Or must you spend the autumn in this gloomy abode of your ancestors? To show myself obedient, I will consent; only in this case you must send your secretary to the Spanish Legation, and your coach-and-six, to bring Melladoro here without delay."



At this speech M. de Nesmond could no longer hide his disgust, but frankly refused to entertain such a proposal for one moment. Whereupon, his wife gave way to violent grief. She could neither eat nor sleep, and being already in a weakly state, soon developed symptoms which frightened her doctors.

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M. de Nesmond was frightened too, and at length sent his rival a polite and pressing invitation to come and stay at the chateau.

This state of affairs went on for six whole years, during which time Madame de Nesmond lavished upon her comely paramour all the wealth amassed by her frugal, orderly spouse.

At last the President could stand it no longer, but went and made a bitter complaint to the King. His Majesty at once asked the Spanish Ambassador to have Melladoro recalled.

At this news, Clorinde was seized with violent convulsions; so severe, indeed, was this attack, that her wretched husband at once sought to have the order rescinded. But as it transpired, the King's wish had been instantly complied with, and the unwelcome news had to be told to Clorinde.

"If you love me," quoth she to her husband, "then grant me this last favour, after which, I swear it, Clorinde will never make further appeal to your kind-heartedness. However quick they have been, my young friend cannot yet have reached the coast. Let me have sight of him once more; let me give him a lock of my hair, a few loving words of advice, and one last kiss before he is lost to me forever."

So fervent was her pleading and so profuse her tears, that M. de Nesmond consented to do all. His coach-and-six was got ready there and then. An hour before sunset the belfries of Havre came in sight, and as it was high tide, they drove right up to the harbour wharf.

The ship had just loosed her moorings, and was gliding out to sea. Clorinde could recognise Melladoro standing amid the passengers on deck. Half fainting, she stretched out her arms and called him in a piteous voice. Blushing, he sought to hide behind his companions, who all begged him to show himself. By means of a wherry Clorinde soon reached the frigate, and the good-natured sailors helped her to climb up the side of the vessel. But in her agitation and bewilderment her foot slipped, and she fell into the sea, whence she was soon rescued by several of the pluckiest of the crew.

As she was being removed to her carriage, the vessel sailed out of harbour. M. de Nesmond took a large house at Havre, in order to nurse her with greater convenience, and had to stop there for a whole month, his wife being at length brought back on a litter to Paris.

Her convalescence was but an illusion after all. Hardly had she reached home when fatal symptoms appeared; she felt that she must die, but showed little concern thereat. The portrait of the handsome Spaniard lay close beside her on her couch. She smiled

at it, besought it to have pity on her loneliness, or scolded it bitterly for indifference, and for going away.

A short time before her death, she sent for her husband and her father, to whom she entrusted the care of her three children.

“Monsieur,” said she to the President de Nesmond, “be kind to my son; he has a right to your name and arms, and though he is my living image, dearest Theodore is your son.” Then turning to her father, who was weeping, she said briefly, “All that to-day remains to you of Clorinde are her two daughters.

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“Pray love them as you loved me, and be more strict with them than you were with me. M. de Nesmond owes these orphans nothing. All that Melladoro owes them is affection. Tell him, I pray you, of my constancy and of my death.”

Such was the sad end of a young wife who committed no greater crime than to love a man who was agreeable and after her own heart. M. de Nesmond was just enough to admit that, in ill-assorted unions, good sense or good nature must intervene, to ensure that the one most to be pitied receive indulgent treatment at the hands of the most culpable, if the latter be also the stronger of the two.

CHAPTER L.

Madame de Montespan's Children and Those of La Valliere.—Monsieur le Dauphin.

I had successively lost the first and second Comte de Vegin; God also chose to take Mademoiselle de Tours from me, who (in what way I know not) was in features the very image of the Queen. Her Majesty was told so, and desired to see my child, and when she perceived how striking was the resemblance, she took a fancy to the charming little girl, and requested that she might frequently be brought to see her. Such friendliness proved unlucky, for the Infanta, as is well known, has never been able to rear one of her children,—a great pity, certainly, for she has had five, all handsome, well-made, and of gracious, noble mien, like the King.

In the case of Mademoiselle de Tours, the Queen managed to conquer her dislike, and also sent for the Duc du Maine. Despite her affection for M. le Dauphin, she herself admitted that if Monseigneur had the airs of a gentleman, M. le Duc du Maine looked the very type of a king's son.

The Duc du Maine, Madame de Maintenon's special pupil, was so well trained to all the exigencies of his position and his rank, that such premature perfection caused him to pass for a prodigy. Than his, no smile could be more winning and sweet; no one could carry himself with greater dignity and ease. He limps slightly, which is a great pity, especially as he has such good looks, and so graceful a figure; his lameness, indeed, was entirely the result of an accident,—a sad accident, due to teething. To please the King, his governess took him once to Auvez, and twice to the Pyrenees, but neither the waters nor the Auvez quack doctors could effect a cure. At any rate, I was fortunate enough to bring up this handsome prince, who, if he treat me with ceremony, yet loves me none the less.

Brought up by the Duc de Montausier, a sort of monkish soldier, and by Bossuet, a sort of military monk, Monsieur le Dauphin had no good examples from which to profit. Crammed as he is with Latin, Greek, German, Spanish, and Church history, he knows all that they teach in colleges, being totally ignorant of all that can only be learnt at the



Court of a king. He has no distinction of manner, no polish or refinement of address; he laughs in loud guffaws, and even raises his voice in the presence of his father. Having been born at Court, his way of bowing is not altogether awkward; but what a difference between his salute and that of the King! "Monseigneur looks just like a German prince." That speech exactly hits him off,—a portrait sketched by no other brush than that of his royal father.

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Monseigneur, who does not like me, pays me court the same as any one else. Being very jealous of the pretty Comte de Vermandois and his brother, the Duc du Maine, he tries to imitate their elegant manner, but is too stiff to succeed. The Duc du Maine shows him the respect inspired by his governess, but the Comte de Vermandois, long separated from his mother, has been less coached in this respect, and being thoroughly candid and sincere, shows little restraint. Often, instead of styling him "Monseigneur," he calls him merely "Monsieur le Dauphin," while the latter, as if such a title were common or of no account, looks at his brother and makes no reply.

When I told the King about such petty fraternal tiffs, he said, "With age, all that will disappear; as a man grows taller, he gets a better, broader view of his belongings."

M. le Dauphin shows a singular preference for Mademoiselle de Nantes, but my daughter, brimful of wit and fun, often makes merry at the expense of her exalted admirer.

Mademoiselle de Blois, the eldest daughter of Madame de la Valliere, is the handsomest, most charming person it is possible to imagine. Her slim, graceful figure reminds one of the beautiful goddesses, with whom poets entertain us; she abounds in accomplishments and every sort of charm. Her tender solicitude for her mother, and their constant close companionship, have doubtless served to quicken her intelligence and penetration.

Like the King, she is somewhat grave; she has the same large brown eyes, and just his Austrian lip, his shapely hand and well-turned leg, almost his selfsame voice. Madame de la Valliere, who, in the intervals of pregnancy, had no bosom to speak of, has shown marked development in this respect since living at the convent. The Princess, ever since she attained the age of puberty, has always seemed adequately furnished with physical charms. The King provided her with a husband in the person of the Prince de Conti, a nephew of the Prince de Conde. They are devotedly attached to each other, being both as handsome as can be. The Princesse de Conti enjoys the entire affection of the Queen, who becomes quite uneasy if she does not see her for five or six days.

Certain foreign princes proposed for her hand, when the King replied that the presence of his daughter was as needful to him as daylight or the air he breathed.

I have here surely drawn a most attractive portrait of this princess, and I ought certainly to be believed, for Madame de Conti is not fond of me at all. Possibly she looks upon me as the author of her mother's disgrace; I shall never be at pains to undeceive her. Until the moment of her departure, Madame de la Valliere used always to visit me. The evening before her going she took supper with me, and I certainly had no cause to read in her looks either annoyance or reproach. Mademoiselle de Montpensier, who happened to call, saw us at table, and stayed to have some dessert with us. She has often told me afterwards how calm and serene the Duchess looked. One would never



have thought she was about to quit a brilliant Court for the hair shirt of the ascetic, and all the death-in-life of a convent. I grieved for her, I wept for her, and I got her a grand gentleman as a husband.

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[This statement is scarcely reconcilable with the fact that Madame de la Valliere remained in a convent until her death. This may refer to Mademoiselle de Blois, La Valliere's daughter, who was given in marriage to the Prince de Conti.—*Editor's note.*]

CHAPTER LI.

Madame de Maintenon's Character.—The Queen Likes Her.—She Revisits Her Family.—Her Grandfather's Papers Restored to Her.

As Madame de Maintenon's character happened to please the King, as I have already stated, he allotted her handsome apartments at Court while waiting until he could keep her there as a fixture, by conferring upon her some important appointment. She had the honour of being presented to the Queen, who paid her a thousand compliments respecting the Duc du Maine's perfections, being so candid and so good natured as to say:

"You would have been just the person to educate Monseigneur."

Unwilling to appear as if she slighted the Dauphin's actual tutors, Madame de Maintenon adroitly replied that, as it seemed to her, M. le Dauphin had been brought up like an angel.

It is said that I have special talent for sustaining and enlivening a conversation; there is something in that, I admit, but to do her justice, I must say that in this respect Madame de Maintenon is without a rival. She has quite a wealth of invention; the most arid subject in her hands becomes attractive; while for transitions, her skill is unequalled. Far simpler than myself, she gauges her whole audience with a single glance. And as, since her misfortunes, her rule has been never to make an enemy, since these easily crop up along one's path, she is careful never to utter anything which could irritate the feelings or wound the pride of the most sensitive. Her descriptions are so varied, so vivacious, that they fascinate a whole crowd. If now and again some little touch of irony escapes her, she knows how to temper and even instantly to neutralise this by terms of praise at once natural and simple.

Under the guise of an extremely pretty woman, she conceals the knowledge and tact of a statesman. I have, moreover, noticed that latterly the King likes to talk about matters of State when she is present. He rarely did this with me.

I think she is at the outset of a successful career. The King made persistent inquiries with regard to her whole family. He has already conferred a petty governorship upon the Comte d'Aubigne, her brother, and the Marquis de la Gallerie, their cousin, has just received the command of a regiment, and a pension.

Madame de Maintenon readily admits that she owes her actual good fortune to myself. I also saw one of her letters to Madame de Saint-Geran, in which she refers to me in terms of gratitude. Sometimes, indeed, she goes too far, even siding with my husband, and condemning what she dares to term my conduct; however, this is only to my face. I have always liked her, and in spite of her affronts, I like her still; but there are times when I am less tolerant, and then we are like two persons just about to fall out.

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The Comte de Toulouse and Mademoiselle de Blois were not entrusted to her at their birth as the others were. The King thought that the additional responsibility of their education would prove too great for the Marquise. He preferred to enjoy her society and conversation, so my two youngest children were placed in the care of Madame d'Arbon, a friend or stewardess of M. de Colbert. Not a great compliment, as I take it.

When, for the second time, Madame de Maintenon took the Duc du Maine to Barege, she returned by way of the Landes, Guienne, and Poitou. She wished to revisit her native place, and show her pupil to all her relations. Perceiving that she was a marquise, the instructress of princes, and a personage in high favour, they were lavish of their compliments and their praise, yet forebore to give her back her property.

Knowing that she was a trifle vain about her noble birth, they made over to her the great family pedigree, as well as a most precious manuscript. These papers, found to be quite correct, included a most spirited history of the War of the League, written by Baron Agrippa d'Aubigne, who might rank as an authority upon the subject, having fought against the Leaguers for over fifteen years. Among these documents the King found certain details that hitherto had been forgotten, or had never yet come to light. And as the Baron was Henri IV.'s favourite aide-de-camp, every reference that he makes to that good king is of importance and interest.

This manuscript, in the simplest manner possible, set forth the governess's ancestors. I am sure she was more concerned about this document than about her property.

CHAPTER LII.

The Young Flemish Lady.—The Sainte-Aldegonde Family.—The Sage of the Sepulchres.

Just at the time of the conquest of Tournai, a most amusing thing occurred, which deserves to be chronicled. Another episode may be recorded also, of a gloomier nature.

Directly Tournai had surrendered, and the new outposts were occupied, the King wished to make his entry into this important town, which he had long desired to see. The people and the burghers, although mute and silent, willingly watched the French army and its King march past, but the aristocracy scarcely showed themselves at any of the windows, and the few folk who appeared here and there on the balconies abstained from applauding the King.

Splendidly apparelled, and riding the loveliest of milk-white steeds, his Majesty proceeded upon his triumphant way, surrounded by the flower of French nobility, and scattering money as he went.

Before the Town Hall the procession stopped, when the magistrates delivered an address, and gave up to his Majesty the keys of the city in a large enamelled bowl.

When the King, looking calmly contented, was about to reply, he observed a woman who had pushed her way through the French guardsmen, and staring hard at him, appeared anxious to get close up to him. In fact, she advanced a step or two, and the epithet that crossed her lips struck the conqueror as being coarsely offensive.

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"Arrest that woman," cried the King. She was instantly seized and brought before him.

"Why do you insult me thus?" he asked quickly, but with dignity.

"I have not insulted you," replied the Flemish lady. "The word that escaped me was rather a term of flattery and of praise, at least if it has the meaning which it conveys to us here, in these semi-French parts."

"Say that word again," added the King; "for I want everybody to bear witness that I am just in punishing you for such an insult."

"Sire," answered this young woman, "your soldiers have destroyed my pasture-lands, my woods, and my crops. Heart-broken, I came here to curse you, but your appearance at once made me change my mind. On looking closer at you, in spite of my grief, I could not help exclaiming, 'So that's the handsome b-----, is it!'"

The grenadiers, being called as witnesses, declared that such was in fact her remark. Then the King smiled, and said to the young Flemish lady:

"Who are you? What is your name?"

With readiness and dignity she replied, "Sire, you see before you the Comtesse de Sainte-Aldegonde."

"Pray, madame," quoth the King, "be so good as to finish your toilet; I invite you to dine with me to-day."

Madame de Sainte-Aldegonde accepted the honour, and did in fact dine with his Majesty that day. She was clever, and made herself most agreeable, so that the King, whose policy it was to win hearts by all concessions possible, indemnified her for all losses sustained during the war, besides granting favours to all her relatives and friends.

The Sainte-Aldegonde family appeared at Court, being linked thereto by good services. It is already a training-ground for excellent officers and persons of merit.

But for that somewhat neat remark of the Countess's, all those gentlemen would have remained in poverty and obscurity within the walls or in the suburbs of Tournai.

Some days after this, the King was informed of the arrest of a most dangerous individual, who had been caught digging below certain ancient aqueducts "with a view to preparing a mine of some sort." This person was brought in, tied and bound like a criminal; they hustled him and maltreated him. I noticed how he trembled and shed tears.

He was a learned man—an antiquary. A few days before our invasion he had commenced certain excavations, which he had been forced to discontinue, and now so great was his impatience that he had been obliged to go on in spite of the surrounding troops. By means of an old manuscript, long kept by the Druids, as also by monks, this man had been able to discover traces of an old Roman highroad, and as in the days of the Romans the tombs of the rich and the great were always placed alongside these broad roads, our good antiquary had been making certain researches there, which for him had proved to be a veritable gold-mine.

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Having made confession of all this to the King, his Majesty set him free, granting him, moreover, complete liberty as regarded the execution of his enterprise.

A few days afterwards he begged to have the honour of presenting to his Majesty some of the objects which he had collected during his researches. I was present, and the following are the funereal curiosities which he showed us:

Having broken open a tomb, he had extracted therefrom a large alabaster vase, which still contained the ashes of the deceased. Next this urn, carefully sealed up, there was another vase, containing three gold rings adorned with precious stones, two gold spurs, the bit of a battle-horse, very slightly rusted, and chased with silver and gold, a sort of seal with rough coat-of-arms, a necklace of large and very choice pearls, a stylet or pencil for calligraphy, and a hundred gold and silver coins bearing the effigy of Domitian, a very wicked emperor, who reigned over Rome and over Gaul in those days.

When the King had amused himself with examining these trinkets, he turned to the antiquary and said, "Is that all, sir? Why, where is Charon's flask of wine?"

"Here, your Majesty," replied the old man, producing a small flask. "See, the wine has become quite clear."

With great difficulty the flask was opened; the wine it contained was pale and odourless, but by those bold enough to taste it, was pronounced delicious.

When overturning the urn in order to empty out the ashes and bury them, they noticed an inscription, which the King instantly translated. It ran thus:

"May the gods who guard tombs punish him who breaks open this mausoleum. The troubles and misfortunes of Aurelius Silvius have been cruel enough during his lifetime; in this tomb at least let him have peace."

The worthy antiquary offered me his pearl necklace and one of the antique rings, but I refused these with a look of horror. He sold the coins to the King, and informed us that his various excavations and researches had brought him in about one hundred thousand livres up to the present time.

The King said to him playfully, "Mind what you are about, monsieur; that sentence which I translated for you is not of a very, reassuring nature."

"Yet it will not serve to hinder me in my scientific researches," replied the savant.

"Charon, who by now must be quite a rich man, evidently disdains all such petty hidden treasures as these. To me they are most useful."

Next time we passed through Tournai, I made inquiries as to this miser, and afterwards informed the King. It appears that he was surprised by robbers when despoiling one of



these tombs. After robbing him of all that he possessed, they buried him alive in the very, grave where he was digging, so as to save expense. What a dismal sort of science! What a life, and what a death!

CHAPTER LIII.

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The Monks of Sainte Amandine.—The Prince of Orange Entrapped.—The Drugged Wine.—The Admirable Judith.

After the furious siege of Conde, which lasted only four days, the King, who had been present, left for Sebourg, whence he sent orders for the destruction of the principal forts of Liege, and for the ravaging of the Juliers district. He treated the Neubourg estates in the same ruthless fashion, as the Duke had abandoned his attitude of neutrality, and had joined the Empire, Holland and Spain. All the Cleves district, and those between the Meuse and the Vahal, were subjected to heavy taxation. Everywhere one saw families in flight, castles sacked, homesteads and convents in flames.

The Duc de Villa-Hermosa, Governor-General in Flanders for the King of Spain, and William of Orange, the Dutch leader, went hither and thither all over the country, endeavouring to rouse the people, and spur them on to offer all possible resistance to the King of France.

These two noble generalissimi even found their way into monasteries and nunneries, and carried off their silver plate, actually, seizing the consecrated vessels used for the sacrament, saying that all such things would help the good cause.

One day they entered a wealthy Bernardine monastery, where the miraculous tomb of Sainte Amandine was on view. The great veneration shown for this saint in all the country thereabouts had served greatly to enrich the community and bring them in numerous costly offerings. The chapel wherein the saint's heart was said to repose was lighted by a huge gold lamp, and on the walls and in niches right up to the ceiling were thousands of votive offerings in enamel, silver, and gold. The Duc de Villa-Hermosa (a good Catholic) dared not give orders for the pillage of this holy chapel, but left that to the Prince of Orange (a good Huguenot).

One evening they came to ask the prior for shelter, who, seeing that he was at the mercy of both armies, had to show himself pleasant to each.

During supper, when the two generals informed him of the object of their secret visit, he clearly perceived that the monastery was about to be sacked, and like a man of resource, at once made up his mind. When dessert came, he gave his guests wine that had been drugged. The generals, growing drowsy, soon fell asleep, and the prior at once caused them to be carried off to a cell and placed upon a comfortable bed.

This done, he celebrated midnight mass as usual, and at its close he summoned the whole community, telling them of their peril and inviting counsel and advice.

"My brethren," asked he, "ought we not to look upon our prisoners as profaners of holy places, and serve them in secret and before God as once the admirable Judith served Holofernes?"

At this proposal there was a general murmur. The assembly grew agitated, but seeing how perilous was the situation, order was soon restored.

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The old monks were of opinion that the two generals ought not yet to be sacrificed, but should be shut up in a subterranean dungeon, a messenger being sent forthwith to the French King announcing their capture.

The young monks protested loudly against such an act, declaring it to be treacherous, disgraceful, felonious. The prior endeavoured to make them listen to reason and be silent, but the young monks, though in a minority, got the upper hand. They deposed the prior, abused and assaulted him, and finally flung him into prison. One of them was appointed prior without ballot, and this new leader, followed by his adherents, roused the generals and officiously sent them away.

The prior's nephew, a young Bernardine, accompanied by a lay brother and two or three servants, set out across country that night, and brought information to the King of all this disorder, begging his Majesty to save his worthy uncle's life.

At the head of six hundred dragoons, the King hastened to the convent and at once rescued the prior, sending the good old monks of Sainte Amandine to Citeaux, and dispersing the rebellious young ones among the Carthusian and Trappist monasteries. All the treasures contained in the chapel he had transferred to his camp, until a calmer, more propitious season.

That priceless capture, the Prince of Orange, escaped him, however, and he was inconsolable thereat, adding, as he narrated the incident, "Were it not that I feared to bring dishonour upon my name, and sully the history of my reign and my life, I would have massacred those young Saint-Bernard monks."

"What a vile breed they all are!" I cried, losing all patience.

"No, no, madame," he quickly rejoined, "you are apt to jump from one extreme to the other. It does not do to generalise thus. The young monks at Sainte Amandine showed themselves to be my enemies, I admit, and for this I shall punish them as they deserve, but the poor old monks merely desired my success and advantage. When peace is declared, I shall take care of them and of their monastery; the prior shall be made an abbot. I like the poor fellow; so will you, when you see him."

I really cannot see why the King should have taken such a fancy to this old monk, who was minded to murder a couple of generals in his convent because, forsooth, Judith once slew Holoernes! Judith might have been tempted to do that sort of thing; she was a Jewess. But a Christian monk! I cannot get over it!

CHAPTER LIV.

The Chevalier de Rohan.—He is Born Too Late.—His Debts.—Messina Ceded to the French.—The King of Spain Meditates Revenge.—The Comte de Monterey.—Madame

de Villars as Conspirator.—The Picpus Schoolmaster.—The Plot Fails.—Discovery and Retribution.—Madame de Soubise's Indifference to the Chevalier's Fate.

Had he been born fifty or sixty years earlier, the Chevalier de Rohan might have played a great part. He was one of those men, devoid of restraint and of principle, who love pleasure above all things, and who would sacrifice their honour, their peace of mind, aye, even the State itself, if such a sacrifice were really needed, in order to attain their own personal enjoyment and satisfaction.

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The year before, he once invited himself to dinner at my private residence at Saint Germain, and he then gave me the impression of being a madman, or a would-be conspirator. My sister De Thianges noticed the same thing, too.

The Chevalier had squandered his fortune five or six years previously; his bills were innumerable.

Each day he sank deeper into debt, and the King remarked, "The Chevalier de Rohan will come to a bad end; it will never do to go on as he does."

Instead of keeping an eye upon him, and affectionately asking him to respect his family's honour, the Prince and Princesse de Soubise made as if it were their duty to ignore him and blush for him.

Profligacy, debts, and despair drove this unfortunate nobleman to make a resolve such as might never be expected of any high-born gentleman.

Discontented with their governor, Don Diego de Soria, the inhabitants of Messina had just shaken off the Spanish yoke, and had surrendered to the King of France, who proffered protection and help.

Such conduct on the part of the French Government seemed to the King of Spain most disloyal, and he desired nothing better than to revenge himself. This is how he set about it.

On occasions of this kind it is always the crafty who are sought out for such work. Comte de Monterey was instructed to sound the Chevalier de Rohan upon the subject, offering him safety and a fortune as his reward. Pressed into their service there was also the Marquise de Villars,—a frantic gambler, a creature bereft of all principle and all modesty,—to whom a sum of twenty thousand crowns in cash was paid over beforehand, with the promise of a million directly success was ensured. She undertook to manage Rohan and tell him what to do. Certain ciphers had to be used, and to these the Marquise had the key. They needed a messenger both intelligent and trustworthy, and for this mission she gave the Chevalier an ally in the person of an ex-teacher in the Flemish school at Picpus, on the Faubourg Saint Antoine. This man and the Chevalier went secretly to the Comte de Monterey in Flanders, and by this trio it was settled that on a certain day, at high tide, Admiral van Tromp with his fleet should anchor off Honfleur or Quillebceuf in Normandy, and that, at a given signal, La Truamont, the Chevalier de Preaux, and the Chevalier de Rohan were to surrender to him the town and port without ever striking a single blow, all this being for the benefit of his Majesty the King of Spain.

But all was discovered. The five culprits were examined, when the Marquise de Villars stated that the inhabitants of Messina had given them an example which the King of France had not condemned!

The Marquise and the two Chevaliers were beheaded, while the ex-schoolmaster was hanged. As for young La Truamont, son of a councillor of the Exchequer, he escaped the block by letting himself be throttled by his guards or gaolers, to whom he offered no resistance.

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Despite her influence upon the King's feelings, the Princess de Soubise did not deign to take the least notice of the trial, and they say that she drove across the Pont-Neuf in her coach just as the Chevalier de Rohan, pinioned and barefooted, was marching to his doom.

CHAPTER LV.

The Prince of Orange Captures Bonn.—The King Captures Orange.—The Calvinists of Orange Offer Resistance.

Since Catiline's famous hatred for Consul Cicero, there has never been hatred so deep and envenomed as that of William of Orange for the King. For this loathing, cherished by a petty prince for a great potentate, various reasons have been given. As for myself, I view things closely and in their true light, and I am convinced that Prince William was actuated by sheer jealousy and envy.

It was affirmed that the King, when intending to give him as bride Mademoiselle de Blois, his eldest daughter and great favourite, had offered to place him on the Dutch throne as independent King, and that to such generous proposals the petty Stadtholder replied, "I am not pious enough to marry the daughter of a Carmelite nun." So absurd a proposal as this, however, was never made, for the simple reason that Mademoiselle de Blois has never yet been offered in marriage to any prince or noble man in this wide world. Rather than to be parted from her, the King would prefer her to remain single. He has often said as much to me, and there is no reason to doubt his word.

The little Principality of Orange, which once formed the estate of this now outlandish family, is situate close to the Rhone, amid French territory. Though decorated with the title of Sovereignty, like its neighbour the Principality of Dombes, it is no less a fief-land of the Crown. In this capacity it has to contribute to the Crown revenues, and owes homage and fealty to the sovereign.

Such petty, formal restrictions are very galling to the arrogant young Prince of Orange, for he is one of those men who desire, at all cost, to make a noise in the world, and who would set fire to Solomon's Temple or to the Delphian Temple, it mattered not which, so long as they made people talk about them.

After Turenne's death, there was a good deal of rivalry among our generals. This proved harmful to the service. The Goddess of Victory discovered this, and at times forsook us. Many possessions that were conquered had to be given up, and we had to bow before those whom erst we had humiliated. But Orange was never restored.—
[This was written in 1677.]

When, in November, 1673, the Prince of Orange had the audacity to besiege Bonn, the residence of our ally, the Prince Elector of Cologne, and to reduce that prelate to the last extremity, the King promptly seized upon the Principality of Orange; and having planted the French flag upon every building, he published a general decree, strictly forbidding the inhabitants to hold any communication whatever with “their former petty sovereign,” and ordering prayers to be said for him, Louis, in all their churches. This is a positive fact.

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The Roman Catholics readily complied with this royal decree, which was in conformity with their sympathies and their interests; but the Protestants waxed furious thereat. Some of them even carried their devotion to such a pitch that they paid taxes to two masters; that is to say, to Stadtholder William, as well as to his Majesty the King.

The Huguenot “ministers,” or priests, issued pastoral letters in praise of the Calvinist Prince and in abuse of the Most Christian King. They also preached against the new oath of fealty, and committed several most imprudent acts, which the Jesuits were not slow to remark and report in Court circles.

Such audacity, and the need for its repression, rankled deep in the King’s heart; and I believe he is quite disposed to pass measures of such extreme severity as will soon deprive the Protestants and Lutherans of any privileges derived from the Edict of Nantes.

From various sources I receive the assurance that he is preparing to deal a heavy blow anent this; but the King’s character is impenetrable. Time alone will show.

CHAPTER LVI

The Castle of Bleink-Elmeink.—Romantic and Extraordinary Discovery.—An Innocent and Persecuted Wife.—Madame de Bleink-Elmeink at Chaillot.

After the siege and surrender of Maestricht, when the King had no other end in view than the entire conquest of Dutch Brabant, he took us to this country, which had suffered greatly by the war. Some districts were wholly devastated, and it became increasingly difficult to find lodging and shelter for the Court.

The grooms of the chambers one day found for us a large chateau, situated in a woody ravine, old-fashioned in structure, and surrounded by a moat. There was only one drawbridge, flanked by two tall towers, surmounted by turrets and culverins. Its owner was in residence at the time. He came to the King and the Queen, and greeting them in French, placed his entire property at their disposal.

It had rained in torrents for two days without ceasing. Despite the season, everybody was wet through and benumbed with cold. Large fires were made in all the huge fireplaces; and when the castle’s vast rooms were lighted up by candles, we agreed that the architect had not lacked grandeur of conception nor good taste when building such large corridors, massive staircases, lofty vestibules, and spacious, resounding rooms. That given to the Queen was like an alcove, decorated by six large marble caryatides, joined by a handsome balustrade high enough to lean upon. The four-post bed was of azure blue velvet, with flowered work and rich gold and silver tasselling. Over the

chimneypiece was the huge Bleink-Elmeink coat-of-arms, supported by two tall Templars.

The King's apartment was an exact reproduction of a room existing at Jerusalem in the time of Saint Louis; this was explained by inscriptions and devices in Gothic or Celtic.

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My room was supposed to be an exact copy of the famous Pilate's chamber, and it was named so; and for three days my eyes were rejoiced by the detailed spectacle of our Lord's Passion, from His flagellation to His agony on Calvary.

The Queen came to see me in this room, and did me the honour of being envious of so charming an apartment.

The fourth day, when the weather became fine, we prepared to change our quarters and take to our carriages again, when an extraordinary event obliged us to send a messenger for the King, who had already left us, and had gone forward to join the army.

An old peasant, still robust and in good health, performed in this gloomy castle the duties of a housekeeper. In this capacity she frequently visited our rooms to receive our orders and satisfy our needs.

Seeing that the Queen's boxes were being closed, and that our departure was at hand, she came to me and said:

"Madame, the sovereign Lord of Heaven has willed it thus; that the officers of the French King should have discovered as the residence of his Court this castle amid gloomy forests and precipices. The great prince has come hither and has stayed here for a brief while, and we have sought to welcome him as well as we could. He gave the Comte de Bleink-Elmeink, lord of this place and my master, his portrait set in diamonds; he had far better have cut his throat."

"Good heavens, woman! What is this you tell me?" I exclaimed. "Of what crime is your master guilty? He seems to me to be somewhat moody and unsociable; but his family is of good renown, and all sorts of good things have been, told concerning it to the King and Queen."

"Madame," replied the old woman, drawing me aside into a window-recess, and lowering her voice, "do you see at the far end of yonder court an old dungeon of much narrower dimensions than the others? In that dungeon lies the good Comtesse de Bleink-Elmeink; she has languished there for five years."

Then this woman informed me that her master, formerly page of honour to the Empress Eleanor, had wedded, on account of her great wealth, a young Hungarian noblewoman, by whom he had two children, both of whom were living. Such was his dislike of their mother, on account of a slight deformity, that for four or five years he shamefully maltreated her, and at last shut her up in this dungeon-keep, allowing her daily the most meagre diet possible.

"When, some few days since, the royal stewards appeared in front of the moat, and claimed admittance, the Count was much alarmed," added the peasant woman. "He

thought that all was discovered, and that he was going to suffer for it. It was not until the King and Queen came that he was reassured, and he has not been able to hide his embarrassment from any of us.”

“Where are the two children of his marriage?” I asked the old woman, before deciding to act.

“The young Baron,” she answered, “is at Vienna or Ohnutz, at an academy there. His sister, a graceful, pretty girl, has been in a convent from her childhood; the nuns have promised to keep her there, and as soon as she is fourteen, she will take the veil.”



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My first impulse was to acquaint the Queen with these astounding revelations, but it soon struck me that, to tackle a man of such importance as the Count, we could not do without the King. I at once sent my secretary with a note, imploring his Majesty to return, but giving no reason for my request. He came back immediately, post-haste, when the housekeeper repeated to him, word for word, all that I have set down here. The King could hardly believe his ears.

When coming to a decision, his Majesty never does so precipitately. He paced up and down the room twice or thrice, and then said to me, "The matter is of a rather singular nature; I am unacquainted with law, and what I propose to do may one day serve as an example. It is my duty to rescue our unfortunate hostess, and requite her nobly for her hospitality."

So saying, he sent for the Count, and assuming a careless, almost jocular air, thus addressed him:

"You were formerly page to the Empress Eleanor, I believe, M. le Bleink-Elmeink?"

"Yes, Sire."

"She is dead, but the Emperor would easily recognise you, would he not?"

"I imagine so, Sire."

"I have thought of you as a likely person to be the bearer of a message, some one of your age and height being needed, and of grave, secretive temperament, such as I notice you to possess. Get everything in readiness, as I intend to send you as courier to his Imperial Majesty. I am going to write to him from here, and you shall bring me back his reply to my proposals."

To be sent off like this was most galling to the Count, but his youth and perfect health allowed him not the shadow of a pretext. He was obliged to pack his valise and start. He pretended to look pleased and acquiescent, but in his eyes I could detect fury and despair.

Half an hour after his departure, the King had the drawbridge raised, and then went to inform the Queen of everything.

"Madame," said he, "you have been sleeping in this unfortunate lady's nuptial bed. She is now about to be presented to you. I ask that you will receive her kindly, and afterwards act as her protector, should anything happen to me."

Tears filled the Queen's eyes, and she trembled in amazement. The King instantly made for the dungeon, and in default of a key, broke open all the gates. In a few minutes Madame de Bleink-Elmeink, supported by two guards, entered the Queen's

presence, and was about to fling herself at her feet; but the King prevented this. He himself placed her in an armchair, and we others at once formed a large semicircle round her.

She seemed to breathe with difficulty, sighing and sobbing without being able to utter a word. At length she said to the King in fairly good French, "May my Creator and yours reward you for this, great and unexpected boon! Do not forsake me, Sire, now that you have broken my fetters, but let your might protect me against the unjust violence of my husband; and permit me to reside in France in whatever convent it please you to choose. My august liberator shall become my lawful King, and under his rule I desire to live and die."

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In spite of her sorrow, Madame de Bleink-Elmeink did not appear to be more than twenty-eight or thirty years old. Her large blue eyes, though she had wept, much, were still splendid, and her high-bred features denoted nobility and beauty of soul. To such a charming countenance her figure scarcely corresponded; one side of her was slightly deformed, yet, this did not interfere with the grace of her attitude when seated, nor her agreeable deportment.

Directly she saw her, the Queen liked her. She looked half longingly at the Countess, and then rising approached her and held out her hand to be kissed, saying, "I mean to love you as if you were one of my own family; you shall be placed at Val-de-Grace, and I will often come and see you."

Recovering herself somewhat, the Countess sank on her knees and kissed the Queen's hand in a transport of joy. We, led her to her room, where she took a little refreshment and afterwards slept until the following day. All her servants and gardeners came to express their gladness at her deliverance; and in order to keep her company, the Queen decided to stay another week at the castle. The Countess then set out for Paris, and it was arranged that she should have the apartments at Chaillot, once constructed by the Queen of England.

As for her dreadful husband, the King gave him plenty to do, and he did not see his wife again for a good long while.

CHAPTER LVII.

The Silver Chandelier.—The King Holds the Ladder.—The Young Dutchman.

One day the King was passing through some of the large rooms of the palace, at a time of the morning when the courtiers had not yet made their appearance, and when carpenters and workmen were about, each busy in getting his work done.

The King noticed a workman of some sort standing tiptoe on a double ladder, and reaching up to unhook a large chandelier from the ceiling. The fellow seemed likely to break his neck.

"Be careful," cried the King; "don't you see that your ladder is a short one and is on castors? I have just come in time to help you by holding it."

"Monsieur," said the man, "a thousand pardons, but if you will do so, I shall be much obliged. On account of this ambassador who is coming today, all my companions have lost their heads and have left me alone."

Then he unhooked the large crystal and silver chandelier, stepped down carefully, leaning on the King's shoulder, who graciously allowed him to do so. After humbly thanking him, the fellow made off.

That night in the chateau every one was talking about the hardihood of some thief who in sight of everybody had stolen a handsome chandelier; the Lord High Provost had already been apprised of the matter. The King began to smile as he said out loud before every one, "I must request the Lord High Provost to be good enough to hush the matter up, as in cases of theft accomplices are punished as well, and it was I who held the ladder for the thief."

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Then his Majesty told us of the occurrence, as already narrated, and every one was convinced that the thief could not be a novice or an apprentice at his craft. Inquiries were instantly made, since so bold an attempt called for exemplary punishment. All the upholsterers of the castle wished to give themselves up as prisoners; their honour was compromised. It would be hard to describe their consternation, being in truth honest folk.

When the Provost respectfully asked the King if he had had time to notice the culprit's features, his Majesty replied that the workman in question was a young fellow of about five-and-twenty, fair complexioned, with chestnut hair, and pleasant features of delicate, almost feminine cast.

At this news, all the dark, plain men-servants were exultant; the good-looking ones, however, were filled with fear.

Among the feutiers, whose sole duty it is to attend to the fires and candles in the royal apartments, there was a nice-looking young Dutchman, whom his companions pointed out to the Provost. They entered his room while he was asleep, and found in his cupboard the following articles: Two of the King's lace cravats, two shirts marked with a double L and the crown, a pair of pale blue velvet shoes embroidered with silver, a flowered waistcoat, a hat with white and scarlet plumes, other trifles, and splendid portrait of the King, evidently part of some bracelet. As regarded the chandelier, nothing was discovered.

When this young foreigner was taken to prison, he refused to speak for twenty-four hours, and in all Versailles there was but one cry,—“They've caught the thief!”

Next day matters appeared in a new light. The Provost informed his Majesty that the young servant arrested was not a Dutchman, but a very pretty Dutch woman.

At the time of the invasion, she was so unlucky as to see the King close to her father's house, and conceived so violent a passion for him that she at once forgot country, family, friends,—everything. Leaving the Netherlands with the French army, she followed her conqueror back to his capital, and by dint of perseverance managed to secure employment in the royal palace. While there, her one delight was to see the King as often as possible, and to listen to praise of his many noble deeds.

“The articles found in my possession,” said she to the Provost, “are most dear and precious to me; not for their worth, but because they have touched the King's person. I did not steal them from his Majesty; I could not do such a thing. I bought them of the valets de chambre, who were by right entitled to such things, and who would have sold them indiscriminately to any one else. The portrait was not sold to me, I admit, but I got it from Madame la Marquise de Montespan, and in this way: One day, in the parterres, madame dropped her bracelet. I had the good fortune to pick it up, and I kept it for



three or four days in my room. Then bills were posted up in the park, stating that whoever brought the bracelet to madame should receive a reward of ten louis. I took back the ornament, for its pearls and diamonds did not tempt me, but I kept the portrait instead of the ten louis offered.”

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When the King asked me if I recollected the occurrence, I assured him that everything was perfectly true. Hereupon the King sent for the girl, who was immediately brought to his chamber. Such was her modesty, and confusion that she dared not raise her eyes from the ground. The King spoke kindly to her, and gave her two thousand crowns to take her back to her own home. The Provost was instructed to restore all these different articles to her, and as regarded myself, I willingly let her have the portrait, though it was worth a good deal more than the ten louis mentioned.

When she got back to her own country and the news of her safe arrival was confirmed, the King sent her twenty thousand livres as a dowry, which enabled her to make a marriage suitable to her good-natured disposition and blameless conduct.

She made a marked impression upon his Majesty, and he was often wont to speak about the chandelier on account of her, always alluding to her in kindly terms. If ever he returns to Holland, I am sure he will want to see her, either from motives of attachment or curiosity. Her name, if I remember rightly, was Flora.

CHAPTER LVIII.

The Observatory.—The King Visits the Carthusians.—How a Painter with His Brush May Save a Convent.—The Guilty Monk.—Strange Revelations.—The King's Kindness.—The Curate of Saint Domingo.

When it was proposed to construct in Paris that handsome building called the Observatory, the King himself chose the site for this. Having a map of his capital before him, he wished this fine edifice to be in a direct line of perspective with the Luxembourg, to which it should eventually be joined by the demolition of the Carthusian Monastery, which filled a large gap.

The King was anxious that his idea should be carried out, but whenever he mentioned it to M. Mansard and the other architects, they declared that it was a great pity to lose Lesueur's admirable frescos in the cloisters, which would have to be destroyed if the King's vast scheme were executed.

One day his Majesty resolved to see for himself, and without the least announcement of his arrival, he went to the Carthusian Monastery in the Rue d'Enfer. The King has great knowledge of art; he admired the whole series of wall-paintings, in which the life of Saint Bruno is divinely set forth.

[By a new process these frescos were subsequently transferred to canvas in 1800 or 1802, at which date the vast property of the Carthusian monks became part of the Luxembourg estates.—*Editor's note.*]



“Father,” said he to the prior who showed him round, “these simple, touching pictures are far beyond all that was ever told me. My intention, I admit, was to move your institution elsewhere, so as to connect your spacious property with my palace of the Luxembourg, but the horrible outrage which would have to be committed deters me; to the marvellous art of Lesueur you owe it that your convent remains intact.”

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The monk, overjoyed, expressed his gratitude to the King, and promised him the love and guardianship of Saint Bruno in heaven.

Just then, service in the chapel was over, and the monks filed past two and two, never raising their eyes from the gloomy pavement bestrewn with tombstones. The prior, clapping his hands, signalled them to stop, and then addressed them:

“My brethren, stay your progress a moment; lift up your heads, bowed down by penance, and behold with awe the descendant of Saint Louis, the august protector of this convent. Yes, our noble sovereign himself has momentarily quitted his palace to visit this humble abode. On these quiet walls which hide our cells, he has sought to read the simple, touching story, of the life of our saintly founder. The august son of Louis the Just has taken our dwelling-place and community under his immediate protection. Go to your cells and pray to God for this magnanimous prince, for his children and successors in perpetuity.”

As he said these flattering words, a monk, with flushed cheeks and mouth agape, flung himself down at the King's feet, beating his brow repeatedly upon the pavement, and exclaiming:

“Sire, forgive me, forgive me, guilty though I be. I crave your royal pardon and pity.”

The prior, somewhat confused, saw that some important confession was about to be made, so he dismissed the others, and sent them back to their devotions. The prostrate monk, however, never thought of moving from his position. Perceiving that he was alone with the King, whose calm, gentle demeanour emboldened him, he begged anew for pardon with great energy, and fervour. The King clearly saw that the penitent was some great evil-doer, and he promised forgiveness in somewhat ambiguous fashion. Then the monk rose and said:

“Your Majesty reigns to-day, and reigns gloriously. That is an amazing miracle, for countless incredible dangers of the direst sort have beset your cradle and menaced your youth. A prince of your house, backed up by ambitious inferiors, resolved to wrest the crown from you, in order to get it for himself and his descendants. The Queen, your mother, full of heroic resolution, herself had energy enough to resist the cabal; but more than once her feet touched the very brink of the precipice, and more than once she nearly fell over it with her children.

“Noble qualities did this great Queen possess, but at times she had too overweening a contempt for her enemies. Her disdain for my master, the young Cardinal, was once too bitter, and begot in this presumptuous prelate's heart undying hatred. Educated under the same roof as M. le Cardinal, with the same teachers and the same doctrines, I saw, as it were, with his eyes when I went out into the world, and marched beneath his banner when civil war broke out.

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“Dreading the punishment for his temerity, this prelate decided that the sceptre should pass into other hands, and that the elder branch should become extinct. With this end in view, he made me write a pamphlet showing that you and your brother, the Prince, were not the King’s sons; and subsequently he induced me to issue another, in which I affirmed on oath that the Queen, your mother, was secretly married to Cardinal Mazarin. Unfortunately, these books met with astounding success, nor, though my tears fall freely, can they ever efface such vile pages.

“I am also guilty of another crime, Sire, and this weighs more heavily upon my heart. When the Queen-mother dexterously arranged for your removal to Vincennes, she left in your bed at the Louvre a large doll. The rebels were aware of this when it was too late. I was ordered to ride post-haste with an escort in pursuit of your carriage; and I had to swear by the Holy Gospels that, if I could not bring you back to Paris, I would stab you to the heart.

“The enormity of my offence weighed heavily upon my spirit and my conscience. I conceived a horror for the Cardinal and withdrew to this convent. For many years I have undergone the most grievous penances, but I shall never make thorough expiation for my sins, and I hold myself to be as great a criminal as at first, so long as I have not obtained pardon from my King.”

“Are you in holy orders?” asked the King gently.

“No, Sire; I feel unworthy to take them,” replied the Carthusian, in dejected tones.

“Let him be ordained as soon as possible,” said his Majesty to the prior. “The monk’s keen repentance touches me; his brain is still excitable; it needs fresh air and change. I will appoint him to a curacy at Saint Domingo, and desire him to leave for that place at the earliest opportunity. Do not forget this.”

The monk again prostrated himself before the King, overwhelming him with blessings, and these royal commands were in due course executed. So it came about that Lesueur’s frescos led to startling revelations, and enabled the Carthusians to keep their splendid property intact, ungainly though this was and out of place.

CHAPTER LIX.

Journey to Poitou.—The Mayor and the Sheriffs of Orleans.—The Marquise’s Modesty.—The Serenade.—The Abbey of Fontevault.—Family Council.—Duchomania.—A Letter to the King.—The Bishop of Poitiers.—The Young Vicar.—Rather Give Him a Regiment.—The Fete at the Convent.—The Presentation.—The Revolt.—A Grand Example.

The Abbess of Fontevrault, who, when a mere nun, could never bear her profession, now loved it with all her heart, doubtless because of the authority and freedom which she possessed, being at liberty to go or come at will, and as absolute mistress of her actions, accountable to no one for these.

She sent me her confidential woman, one of the “travelling sisters” of the community, to tell me privately that the Principality of Talmont was going to be sold, and to offer me her help at this important juncture.

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Her letter, duly tied up and sealed, begged me to be bold and use my authority, if necessary, in order to induce the King at last to give his approval and consent. "What!" she wrote, "my dear sister; you have given birth to eight children, the youngest of which is a marvel, and you have not yet got your reward. All your children enjoy the rank of prince, and you, their mother, are exempt from such distinction! What is the King thinking about? Does it add to his dignity, honour, and glory that you should still be merely a petty marquise? I ask again, what is the King thinking of?"

In conclusion my sister invited me to pay a visit to her charming abbey. "We have much to tell you," said she, and "such brief absence is needful to you, so as to test the King's affection. Your sort of temperament suits him, your talk amuses him; in fact, your society is absolutely essential to him; the distance from Versailles to Saumur would seem to him as far off as the uttermost end of his kingdom. He will send courier upon courier to you; each of his letters will be a sort of entreaty, and you have only just got to express your firm intention and desire to be created a duchess or a princess, and, my dear sister, it will forthwith be done."

For two days I trained the travelling nun from Fontevrault in her part, and then I suddenly presented her to the King. She had the honour of explaining to his Majesty that she had left the Abbess sick and ailing, and informed him that my sister was most anxious to see me again, and that she hoped his Majesty would not object to my paying her a short visit. For a moment the King hesitated; then he asked me if I thought such a change of urgent necessity. I replied that the news of Madame de Mortemart's ill-health had greatly affected me, and I promised not to be away more than a week.

The King accordingly instructed the Marquis de Louvois—[Minister of War, and inspector-General of Posts and Relays.]—to make all due arrangements for my journey, and two days afterwards, my sister De Thianges, her daughter the Duchesse de Nevers, and myself, set out at night for Poitiers.

The royal relays took us as far as Orleans, after which we had post-horses, but specially chosen and well harnessed. Couriers in advance of us had given all necessary orders to the officials and governors, so that we were provided with an efficient military escort along the road, and were as safe as if driving through Paris.

At Orleans, the mayor and sheriffs in full dress presented themselves at our carriage window, and were about to deliver an address "to please the King;" but I thought such a proceeding ill-timed, and my niece De Nevers told these magnates that we were travelling incognito.

Crowds collected below our balcony. Madame de Thianges thought they were going to serenade me, but I distinctly heard sounds of hissing. My niece De Nevers was greatly upset; she would eat no supper, but began to cry. "What are you worrying about?" quoth I to this excitable young person. "Don't you see that we are stopping the night on

the estates of the Princess Palatine,—[The boorish Bavarian princess, the Duc d'Orleans's second wife. *Editor's note.*]—and that it is to her exquisite breeding that we owe compliments of this kind?"

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Next morning at daybreak we drove on, and the day after we reached Fontevrault. The Abbess, accompanied by her entire community, came to welcome us at the main gate, and her surpliced chaplains offered me holy water.

After rest and refreshment, we made a detailed survey of her little empire, and everywhere observed traces of her good management and tact. Rules had been made more lenient, while not relaxed; the revenues had increased; everywhere embellishments, contentment, and well-being were noticeable.

After praising the Abbess as she deserved, we talked a little about the Talmont principality. My sister was inconsolable. The Tremouilles had come into property which restored their shattered fortunes; the principality was no longer for sale; all thought of securing it must be given up.

Strange to say, I at once felt consoled by such news. Rightly to explain this feeling, I ought, perhaps, to make an avowal. A grand and brilliant title had indeed ever been the object of my ambition; but I thought that I deserved such a distinction personally, for my own sake, and I was always wishing that my august friend would create a title specially in my favour. I had often hinted at such a thing in various ways, and full as he is of wit and penetration, he always listened to my covert suggestions, and was perfectly aware of my desire. And yet, magnificently generous as any mortal well could be, he never granted my wish. Any one else but myself would have been tired, disheartened even; but at Court one must never be discouraged nor give up the game. The atmosphere is rife with vicissitude and change. Monotony would seem to have made there its home; yet no day is quite like another. What one hopes for is too long in coming; and what one never foresees on, a sudden comes to pass.

We took counsel together as to the best thing to be done. Madame de Thianges said to me: "My dear Athenais, you have the elegance of the Mortemarts, the fine perception and ready wit that distinguishes them, but strangely enough you have not their energy, nor the firm will necessary for the conduct of weighty matters. The King does not treat you like a great friend, like a distinguished friend, like the mother of his son, the Duc du Maine; he treats you like a province that he has conquered, on which he levies tax after tax; that is all. Pray recollect, my sister, that for ten years you have played a leading part on the grand stage. Your beauty, to my surprise, has been preserved to you, notwithstanding your numerous confinements and the fatigues of your position. Profit by the present juncture, and do not let the chance slip. You must write to the King, and on some pretext or other, ask for another week's leave. You must tell him plainly that you have been marquise long enough, and that the moment has come at last for you to have the 'imperiale',

[The distinctive mark of duchesses was the 'imperiale'; that is, a rich and costly hammer-cloth of embroidered velvet, edged with gold, which covered the roofs of ducal equipages.—*Editor's note.*]

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and sign your name in proper style.”

Her advice was considered sound, but the Abbess, taking into account the King's susceptibility, decided that it would not do for me to write myself about a matter so important as this. The Marquise de Thianges, in some way or other, had got the knack of plain speaking, so that a letter of hers would be more readily excused. Thus it was settled that she should write; and write she did. I give her letter verbatim, as it will please my readers; and they will agree with me that I could never have touched this delicate subject so happily myself.

Sire:—Madame de Montespan had the honour of writing one or two notes to you during our journey, and now she rests all day long in this vast and pleasant abbey, where your Majesty's name is held in as great veneration as elsewhere, being beloved as deeply as at Versailles. Madame de Mortemart has caused one of the best portraits of your Majesty, done by Mignard, to be brought hither from Paris, and this magnificent personage in royal robes is placed beneath an amaranth-coloured dais, richly embroidered with gold, at the extreme end of a vast hall, which bears the name of our illustrious and well-beloved monarch. Your privileges are great, in truth, Sire. Here you are, installed in this pious and secluded retreat, where never mortal may set foot. Before you, beside you daily, you may contemplate the multitude of modest virgins who look at you and admire you, becoming all of them attached to you without wishing it, perhaps without knowing it, even.

Surely, Sire, your penetration is a most admirable thing. After your first interview with her, you considered our dear Abbess to be a woman of capacity and talent. You rightly appreciated her, for nothing can be compared to the perfect order that prevails in her house. She is active and industrious without sacrificing her position and her dignity in the slightest. Like yourself, she can judge of things in their entirety, and examine them in every little detail; like yourself, she knows how to command obedience and affection, desiring nothing but that which is just and reasonable. In a word, Sire, Madame de Mortemart has the secret of convincing her subordinates that she is acting solely in their interests, a supreme mission, in sooth, among men; and my sister really has no other desire nor ambition,—to this we can testify.

Upon our return, which for our liking can never be too soon, we will acquaint your Majesty with the slight authorised mortification which we had to put up with at Orleans. We are in possession of certain information regarding this, and your Majesty will have ample means of throwing a light upon the subject. As for the magistrates, they behaved most wonderfully; they had an address all ready for us, but Madame de Montespan would not listen to it, saying that “such honours are meet only for you and for your children.” Such modesty on my sister's part is in keeping

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with her great intelligence; I had almost said her genius. But in this matter I was not wholly of her opinion. It seemed to me, Sire, that, in refusing the homage offered to her by these worthy magnates, she, so to speak, disowned the rank ensured to her by your favour. While the Marquise enjoys your noble affection, she is no ordinary personage. She has her seat in your own Chapel Royal, so in travelling she has a right to special honour. By your choice of her, you have made her notable; in giving her your heart, you have made her a part of yourself. By giving birth to your children, she has acquired her rank at Court, in society, and in history. Your Majesty intends her to be considered and respected; the escorts of cavalry along the highroads are sufficient proof of that.

All France, Sire, is aware of your munificence and of your princely generosity: Shall I tell you of the amazement of the provincials at noticing that the ducal housings are absent from my sister's splendid coach? Yes, I have taken upon myself to inform you of this surprise, and knowing how greatly Athenais desires this omission to be repaired, I went so far as to promise that your Majesty would cause this to be done forthwith. It must be done, Sire; the Marquise loves you as much as it is possible for you to be loved; of this, all that she has sacrificed is a proof. But while dearly loving you, she fears to appear importunate, and were it not for my respectful freedom of speech, perhaps you would still be ignorant of that which she most fervently desires.

What we all three of us ask is but a slight thing for your Majesty, who, with a single word, can create a thousand nobles and princes. The kings, your ancestors, used their glory in making their lovers illustrious. The Valois built temples and palaces in their honour. You, greater than all the Valois, should not let their example suffice. And I am sure that you will do for the mother of the Duc du Maine what the young prince himself would do for her if you should happen to forget.

Your Majesty's most humble servant, "*Marquise de Thianges*."

To the Abbess and myself; this ending seemed rather too sarcastic, but Madame de Thianges was most anxious to let it stand. There was no way of softening or glossing it over; so the letter went off, just as she had written it.

It so happened that the Bishop of Poitiers was in his diocese at the time. He came to pay me a visit, and ask me if I could get an abbey for his nephew, who, though extremely young, already acted as vicar-general for him. "I would willingly get him a whole regiment," I replied, "provided M. de Louvois be of those that are my friends. As for the benefices, they depend, as you know, upon the Pere de la Chaise, and I don't think he would be willing to grant me a favour."

"Permit me to assure you, madame, that in this respect you are in error," replied the Bishop. "Pere de la Chaise respects you and honours you, and only speaks of you in

such terms. What distresses him is to see that you have an aversion for him. Let me write to him, and say that my nephew has had the honour of being presented to you, and that you hoped he might have a wealthy abbey to enable him to bear the privations of his calling."

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The young vicar-general was good-looking, and of graceful presence. He had that distinction of manner which causes the priesthood to be held in honour, and that amenity of address which makes the law to be obeyed. My sisters began to take a fancy to him, and recommended him to me. I wrote to Pere de la Chaise myself, and instead of a mere abbey, we asked for a bishopric for him.

It was my intention to organise a brilliant fete for the Fontevrault ladies, and invite all the nobility of the neighbourhood. We talked of this to the young vicar, who highly approved of my plan, and albeit monsieur his uncle thought such a scheme somewhat contrary to rule and to what he termed the proprieties, we made use of his nephew, the young priest, as a lever; and M. de Poitiers at last consented to everything.

The Fontevrault gardens are one of the most splendid sights in all the country round. We chose the large alley as our chief entertainment-hall, and the trees were all illuminated as in my park at Clagny, or at Versailles. There was no dancing, on account of the nuns, but during our repast there was music, and a concert and fireworks afterwards. The fete ended with a performance of "Genevieve de Brabant," a grand spectacular pantomime, played to perfection by certain gentry of the neighbourhood; it made a great impression upon all the nuns and novices.

Before going down into the gardens, the Abbess wished to present me formally to all the nuns, as well as to those persons it had pleased her to invite. Imagine her astonishment! Three nuns were absent, and despite our entreaties and the commands of their superiors, they persisted in their rebellion and their refusal. They set up to keep rules before all things, and observe the duties of their religion, lying thus to their Abbess and their conscience. It was all mere spite. Of this there can be no doubt, for one of these refractory creatures, as it transpired, was a cousin of the Marquis de Lauzun, my so-called victim; while the other two were near relatives of Mademoiselle de Mauldon, an intimate friend of M. de Meaux.

In spite of these three silly absentees, we enjoyed ourselves greatly, and had much innocent amusement; while they, who could watch us from their windows, were probably mad with rage to think they were not of our number.

My sister complained of them to the Bishop of Poitiers, who severely blamed them for such conduct; and seeing that he could not induce them to offer me an apology, sent them away to three different convents.

CHAPTER LX.

The Page-Dauphin.—A Billet from the King.—Madame de Maintenon's Letter.—The King as Avenger.—His Sentence on the Murderers.

The great liberty which we enjoyed at Fontevrault, compared with the interminable bondage of Saint Germain or Versailles, made the abbey ever seem more agreeable to me; and Madame de Thianges asked me in sober earnest "if I no longer loved the King."

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"Of course I do," was my answer; "but may one not love oneself just a little bit, too? To me, health is life; and I assure you, at Fontevrault, my dear sister, I sleep most soundly, and have quite got rid of all my nervous attacks and headaches."

We were just talking thus when Madame de Mortemart entered my room, and introduced young Chamilly, the Page-Dauphin,—[The chief page-in-waiting bore the title of Page-Dauphin]—who brought with him a letter from the King. He also had one for me from Madame de Maintenon, rallying me upon my absence and giving me news of my children. The King's letter was quite short, but a king's note such as that is worth a whole pile of commonplace letters. I transcribe it here:

I am jealous; an unusual thing for me. And I am much vexed, I confess, with Madame de Mortemart, who might have chosen a very different moment to be ill. I am ignorant as to the nature of her malady, but if it be serious, and of those which soon grow more dangerous, she has played me a very sorry trick in sending for you to act as her nurse or her physician. Pray tell her, madame, that you are no good whatever as a nurse, being extremely hasty and impatient in everything; while as regards medical skill, you are still further from the mark, since you have never yet been able to understand your own ailments, nor even explain these with the least clearness. I must ask the Abbess momentarily to suspend her sufferings and come to Versailles, where all my physicians shall treat her with infinite skill; and, to oblige me, will cure her, as they know how much I esteem and like her. Farewell, my ladies three, who in your friendship are but as one. I should like to be there to make a fourth. Madame de Maintenon, who loves you sincerely, will give you news of your little family and of Saint Germain. Her letter and mine will be brought to you and delivered by the young Comte de Chamilly. Send him back to me at once, and don't let him, see your novices or your nuns, else he will not want to return to me. *Louis*.

Madame de Maintenon's letter was not couched in the same playfully mocking tone; though a marquise, she felt the distance that there was between herself and me; besides, she always knows exactly what is the proper thing to do. The Abbess, who is an excellent judge, thought this letter excellently written. She wanted to have a copy of it, which made me determine to preserve it. Here it is, a somewhat more voluminous epistle than that of the King:

I promised you, madame, that I would inform you as often as possible of all that interests you here, and now I keep my promise, being glad to say that I have only pleasant news to communicate. His Majesty is wonderfully well, and though annoyed at your journey, he has hardly lost any of his gaiety, as seemingly he hopes to have you back again in a day or two.

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Mademoiselle de Nantes declares that she would have behaved very well in the coach, and that she is a nearer relation to you than the Duchesse de Nevers, and that it was very unfair not to take her with you this time. In order to comfort her, the Duc du Maine has discovered an expedient which greatly amuses us, and never fails of its effect. He tells her how absolutely necessary it is for her proper education that she should be placed in a convent, and then adds in a serious tone that if she had been taken to Fontevault she would never have come back!

“Oh, if that is the case,” she answered, “why, I am not jealous of the Duchesse de Nevers.”

The day after your departure the Court took up its quarters at Saint Germain, where we shall probably remain for another week. You know, madame, how fond his Majesty is of the Louis Treize Belvedere, and the telescope erected by this monarch,—one of the best ever made hitherto. As if by inspiration, the King turned this instrument to the left towards that distant bend which the Seine makes round the verge of the Chatou woods. His Majesty, who observes every thing, noticed two bathers in the river, who apparently were trying to teach their much younger companion, a lad of fourteen or fifteen, to swim; doubtless, they had hurt him, for he got away from their grasp, and escaped to the river-bank, to reach his clothes and dress himself. They tried to coax him back into the water, but he did not relish such treatment; by his gestures it was plain that he desired no further lessons. Then the two bathers jumped out of the river, and as he was putting on his shirt, dragged him back into the water, and forcibly held him under till he was drowned.

When they had committed this crime, and their victim was murdered, they cast uneasy glances at either river-bank, and the heights of Saint Germain. Believing that no one had knowledge of their deed, they put on their clothes, and with all a murderer’s glee depicted on their evil countenances, they walked along the bank in the direction of the castle. The King instantly rode off in pursuit, accompanied by five or six musketeers; he got ahead of them, and soon turned back and met them.

“Messieurs,” said he to them, “when you went away you were three in number; what have you done with your comrade?” This question, asked in a firm voice, disconcerted them somewhat at first, but they soon replied that their companion wanted to have a swim in the river, and that they had left him higher up the stream near the corner of the forest, close to where his clothes and linen made a white spot on the bank.

On hearing this answer the King gave orders for them to be bound and brought back by the soldiery to the old chateau, where they were shut up in separate rooms. His Majesty, filled with indignation, sent for the High Provost, and recounting to him what took place before his eyes, requested him to try the culprits there and then. The Marquis, however, is always scrupulous to excess; he begged the King to reflect that at such a great distance, and viewed through a telescope, things might have seemed

somewhat different from what they actually were, and that, instead of forcibly holding their companion under the water, perhaps the two bathers were endeavouring to bring him to the surface.

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"No, monsieur, no," replied his Majesty; "they dragged him into the river against his will, and I saw their struggles and his when they thrust him under the water."

"But, Sire," replied this punctilious personage, "our criminal law requires the testimony of two witnesses, and your Majesty, all-powerful though you be, can only furnish that of one."

"Monsieur," replied the King gently, "I authorise you in passing sentence to state that you heard the joint testimony of the King of France and the King of Navarre."

Seeing that this failed to convince the judge, his Majesty grew impatient and said to the old Marquis, "King Louis IX., my ancestor, sometimes administered justice himself in the wood at Vincennes; I will to-day follow his august example and administer justice at Saint Germain."

The throne-room was at once got ready by his order. Twenty notable burgesses of the town were summoned to the castle, and the lords and ladies sat with these upon the benches. The King, wearing his orders, took his seat when the two prisoners were placed in the dock.

By their contradictory statements, ever-increasing embarrassment, and unvarnished assertions, the jury were soon convinced of their guilt. The unhappy youth was their brother, and had inherited property from their mother, he being her child by a second husband. So these monsters murdered him for revenge and greed. The King sentenced them to be bound hand and foot, and flung into the river in the selfsame place "where they killed their young brother Abel."

When they saw his Majesty leaving his throne, they threw themselves at his feet, implored his pardon, and confessed their hideous crime. The King, pausing a moment, thanked God that their conscience had forced such confession from them, and then remitted the sentence of confiscation only. They were executed before the setting of that sun which had witnessed their crime, and the next day, that is, yesterday evening, the three bodies, united once more by fate, were found floating about two leagues from Saint Germain, under the willows at the edge of the river near Poissy.

Orders were instantly given for their separate interment. The youngest was brought back to Saint Germain, where the King wished him to have a funeral befitting his innocence and untimely fate. All the military attended it.

Forgive me, madams, for all these lengthy details; we have all been so much upset by this dreadful occurrence, and can talk of nothing else,—in fact, it will furnish matter for talk for a long while yet.



I sincerely hope that by this time Madame de Mortsmart has completely recovered. I agree with his Majesty that, in doctoring, you have not had much experience; still, friendship acts betimes as a most potent talisman, and the heart of the Abbess is of those that in absence pines, but which in the presence of some loved one revives.

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She has deigned to grant me a little place in her esteem; pray tell her that this first favour has somewhat spoiled me, and that now I ask for more than this, for a place in her affections. Madame de Thianges and Madame de Nevers are aware of my respect and attachment for them, and they approve of this, for they have engraved their names and crests on my plantain-trees at Maintenon. Such inscriptions are a bond to bind us, and if no mischance befall, these trees, as I hope, will survive me.

I am, madame, *etc.*, *Maintenon*.

CHAPTER LXI.

Mademoiselle d'Amurande.—The Married Nun.—The Letter to the Superior.—Monseigneur's Discourse.—The Abduction.—A Letter from the King.—Beware of the Governess.—We Leave Fontevault.

Among the novices at Fontevault there was a most interesting, charming young person, who gave Madame de Mortemart a good deal of anxiety, as she thought her still undecided as to the holy profession she was about to adopt. This interested me greatly, and evoked my deepest sympathy.

The night of our concert and garden fete she sang to please the Abbess, but there were tears in her voice. I was touched beyond expression, and going up to her at the bend of one of the quickset-hedges, I said, "You are unhappy, mademoiselle; I feel a deep interest for you. I will ask Madame de Mortemart to let you come and read to me; then we can talk as we like. I should like to help you if I can."

She moved away at once, fearing to be observed, and the following day I met her in my sister's room.

"Your singing and articulation are wonderful, mademoiselle," said I, before the Abbess; "would you be willing to come and read to me for an hour every day? I have left my secretary at Versailles, and I am beginning to miss her much."

Madame de Mortemart thanked me for my kindly intentions towards the young novice, who, from that time forward, was placed at my disposal.

The reading had no other object than to gain her confidence, and as soon as we were alone I bade her tell me all. After brief hesitation, the poor child thus began:

"In a week's time, a most awful ceremony takes place in this monastery. The term of my novitiate has already expired, and had it not been for the distractions caused by your visit, I should have already been obliged to take this awful oath and make my vows.

“Madame de Mortemart is gentle and kind (no wonder! she is your sister), but she has decided that I am to be one of her nuns, and nothing on earth can induce her to change her mind. If this fatal decree be executed, I shall never live to see this year of desolation reach its close. Perhaps I may fall dead at the feet of the Bishop who ordains us.

“They would have me give to God—who does not need it—my whole life as a sacrifice. But, madame, I cannot give my God this life of mine, as four years ago I surrendered it wholly to some one else. Yes, madame,” said she, bursting into tears, “I am the lawful wife of the Vicomte d’Olbruze, my cousin german.

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“Of this union, planned and approved by my dear mother herself, a child was born, which my ruthless father refuses to recognise, and which kindly peasants are bringing up in the depths of the woods.

“My dear, good mother was devotedly fond of my lover, who was her nephew. From our very cradles she had always destined us for each other. And she persisted in making this match, despite her husband, whose fortune she had immensely increased, and one day during his absence we were legally united by our family priest in the castle chapel. My father, who, was away at sea, came back soon afterwards: He was enraged at my mother’s disobedience, and in his fury attempted to stab her with his own hand. He made several efforts to put an end to her existence, and the general opinion in my home is that he was really the author of her death.

“Devotedly attached to my husband by ties of love no less than of duty, I fled with him to his uncle’s, an old knight-commander of Malta, whose sole heir he was. My father, with others, pursued us thither, and scaled the walls of our retreat by night, resolved to kill his nephew first and me afterwards. Roused by the noise of the ruffians, my husband seized his firearms. Three of his assailants he shot from the balcony, and my father, disguised as a common man, received a volley in the face, which destroyed his eyesight. The Parliament of Rennes took up the matter. My husband thought it best not to put in an appearance, and after the evidence of sundry witnesses called at random, a warrant for his arrest as a defaulter was issued, a death penalty being attached thereto.

“Ever since that time my husband has been wandering about in disguise from province to province. Doomed to solitude in our once lovely chateau, my father forced me to take the veil in this convent, promising that if I did so, he would not bring my husband to justice.

“Perhaps, madame, if the King were truly and faithfully informed of all these things, he would have compassion for my grief, and right the injustice meted out to my unlucky husband.”

After hearing this sad story, I clearly saw that, in some way or other, we should have to induce Madame de Mortemart to postpone the ceremony of taking the vow, and I afterwards determined to put these vagaries on the part of the law before my good friend President de Nesmond, who was the very man to give us good advice, and suggest the right remedy.

As for the King, I did not deem it fit that he should be consulted in the matter. Of course I look upon him as a just and wise prince, but he is the slave of form. In great families, he does not like to hear of marriages to which the father has not given formal consent; moreover, I did not forget about the gun-shot which blinded the gentleman, and made him useless for the rest of his life. The King, who is devoted to his nobles, would never

have pronounced in favour of the Vicomte, unless he happened to be in a particularly good humour. Altogether, it was a risky thing.

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I deeply sympathised with Mademoiselle d'Amurande in her trouble, and assured her of my good-will and protection, but I begged her to approve my course of action, though taken independently of the King. She willingly left her fate in my hands, and I bade her write my sister the following note:

Madame:—You know the vows that bind me; they are sacred, having been plighted at the foot of the altar. Do not persist, I entreat you, do not persist in claiming the solemn declaration of my vows. You are here to command the Virgins of the Lord, but among these I have no right to a place. I am a mother, although so young, and the Holy Scriptures tell me every day that Hagar, the kindly hearted, may not forsaken her darling Ishmael.

I happened to be with Madame de Mortemart when one of the aged sisters brought her this letter. On reading it she was much affected. I feigned ignorance, and asked her kindly what was the reason of her trouble. She wished to hide it; but I insisted, and at last persuaded her to let me see the note. I read it calmly and with reflection, and afterwards said to the Abbess:

“What! You, sister, whose distress and horror I witnessed when our stern parents shut you up in a cloister,—are you now going to impose like fetters upon a young and interesting person, who dreads them, and rejects them as once you rejected them?”

Madame de Mortemart replied, “I was young then, and without experience, when I showed such childish repugnance as that of which you speak. At that age one knows nothing of religion nor of the eternal verities. Only the world, with its frivolous pleasures, is then before one’s eyes; and the spectacle blinds our view, even our view of heaven. Later on I deplored such resistance, which so grieved my family; and when I saw you at Court, brilliant and adored, I assure you, my dear Marquise, that this convent and its solitude seemed to me a thousand times more desirable than the habitation of kings.”

“You speak thus philosophically,” I replied, “only because your lot happens to have undergone such a change. From a slave, you have become an absolute and sovereign mistress. The book of rules is in your hands; you turn over its leaves wherever you like; you open it at whatever page suits you; and if the book should chance to give you a severe rebuke, you never let others know this. Human nature was ever thus. No, no, madame; you can never make one believe that a religious life is in itself such an attractive one that you would gladly resume it if the dignities of your position as an abbess were suddenly wrested from you and given to some one else.”

“Well, well, if that is so,” said the Abbess, reddening, “I am quite ready to send in my resignation, and so return you your liberality.”



"I don't ask you for an abbey which you got from the King," I rejoined, smiling; "but the favour, which I ask and solicit you can and ought to grant. Mademoiselle d'Amurande points out to you in formal and significant terms that she cannot enrol herself among the Virgins of the Lord, and that the gentle Hagar of Holy Writ may not forsake Ishmael. Such a confession plainly hints at an attachment which religion cannot violate nor destroy, else our religion would be a barbarous one, and contrary to nature.

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“Since God has brought me to this convent, and by chance I have got to know and appreciate this youthful victim, I shall give her my compassion and help,—I, who have no necessity to make conversions by force in order to add to the number of my community. If I have committed any grave offence in the eyes of God, I trust that He will pardon me in consideration of the good work that I desire to do. I shall write to the King, and Mademoiselle d’Amurande shall not make her vows until his Majesty commands her to do so.”

This last speech checkmated my sister. She at once became gentle, sycophantic, almost caressing in manner, and assured me that the ceremony of taking the vow would be indefinitely postponed, although the Bishop of Lugon had already prepared his homily, and invitations had been issued to the nobility.

Madame de Mortemart is the very embodiment of subtlety and cunning. I saw that she only wanted to gain time in order to carry out her scheme. I did not let myself be hoodwinked by her promises, but went straight to work, being determined to have my own way.

Hearing from Mademoiselle d’Amurande that her friend and ally, the old commander, was still living, I was glad to know that she had in him such a staunch supporter. “It is the worthy commander,” said I, “who must be as a father to you, until I have got the sentence of the first Parliament cancelled.” Then we arranged that I should get her away with me from the convent, as there seemed to be little or no difficulty about this.

Accordingly, three days afterwards I dressed her in a most elegant costume of my niece’s. We went out in the morning for a drive, and the nuns at the gateway bowed low, as usual, when my carriage passed, never dreaming of such a thing as abduction.

That evening the whole convent seemed in a state of uproar. Madame de Mortemart, with flaming visage, sought to stammer out her reproaches. But as there was no law to prevent my action, she had to hide her vexation, and behave as if nothing had happened.

The following year I wrote and told her that the judgment of the Rennes Parliament had been cancelled by the Grand Council, as it was based on conflicting evidence. The blind Comte d’Amurande had died of rage, and the young couple, who came into all his property, were eternally grateful to me, and forever showered blessings upon my head.

The Abbess wrote back to say that she shared my satisfaction at so happy a conclusion, and that Madame d’Olbruse’s disappearance from Fontevrault had scarcely been noticed.

The Marquise de Thianges, whose ideas regarding such matters were precisely the same as my own, confined herself to stating that I had not told her a word about it. She

spoke the truth; for the enterprise was not of such difficulty that I needed any one to help me.

On the twelfth day, as we were about to leave Fontevrault, I received another letter from the King, which was as follows:

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As the pain in your knee continues, and the Bourbonne waters have been recommended to you, I beg you, madame, to profit by being in their vicinity, and to go and try their effect. Mademoiselle de Nantes is in fairly good health, yet it looks as if a return of her fluxion were likely. Five or six pimples have appeared on her face, and there is the same redness of the arms as last year. I shall send her to Bourbonne; your maids and the governess will accompany her. The Prince de Conde, who is in office there, will show you every attention. I would rather see you a little later on in good health, than a little sooner, and ailing.

My kindest messages to Madame de Thianges, the Abbess, and all those who show you regard and sympathy. Madame de Nevers might invite you to stay with her; on her return I will not forget such obligation.

Louis.

We left Fontevault after a stay of fifteen days; to the nuns and novices it seemed more like fifteen minutes, but to Madame de Mortemart, fifteen long years. Yet that did not prevent her from tenderly embracing me, nor from having tears in her eyes when the time came for us to take coach and depart.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

All the death-in-life of a convent
Cuddlings and caresses of decrepitude
In ill-assorted unions, good sense or good nature must intervene