

# AT FONTAINEBLEAU.

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In March, 1610, King Henry went, as usual, to Fontainebleau, where he diverted himself with hunting. It was during this visit that the Court credited him with seeing—I think, on the Friday before the Feast of the Virgin—the Great Huntsman; and even went so far as to specify the part of the forest in which he came upon it and the form—that of a gigantic black horseman, surrounded by hounds—which it assumed. The specter had not been seen since the year 1598; nevertheless, the story spread widely, those who whispered citing in its support not only the remarkable agitation into which the Queen fell publicly on the evening of that day but also some strange particulars that attended the King's return from the forest; and, being taken up and repeated, and confirmed, as many thought, by the unhappy sequence of his death, the fable found a little later almost universal credence, so that it may now be found in books.

As happened, however, I was that day at Fontainebleau, and hunted with the King; and, favored both by chance and the confidence with which my master never failed to honor me, am able not only to refute this story, but to narrate the actual facts from which it took its rise. And though there are some, I know, who boast that they had the tale from the King's own mouth, I undertake to prove either that they are romancers who seek to add an inch to their stature, or that they follow the usual interpretation on the hasty words he vouchsafed such chatters.

As a fact, the King, on that day wishing to discuss with me the preparations for the Queen's entry, bade me keep close to him, since he had more inclination for my company than the chase. But the crowd that attended him was so large, the day being fine and warm—and comprised, besides, so many ladies, whose badinage and gaiety he could never forget—that I found him insensibly drawn from me. Far from being displeased, I was glad to see him forget the moodiness which had of late oppressed him; and beyond keeping within sight of him, gave up, for the time, all thought of affairs, and found in the beauty of the spectacle sufficient compensation.

The bright dresses and waving feathers of the party showed to the greatest advantage as the long cavalcade wound through the heather on the valley below the Aremonts; and whether I looked to the front or rear—the huntsmen, with their great horns, or the hounds straining in the leashes—I was equally charmed with a sight at once joyous and gallant, and one to which the calls of duty had of late made me a stranger.

On a sudden a quarry was started, and the company, galloping off pell-mell, with a merry hurst of music, were in a moment dispersed, some taking this track, and others that, through the rocks and debris that make that part of the forest difficult. Singing out the King, I kept near him as possible until the chase led us into the Aremont covers, where, the trees growing thickly, and the rides cut through them being intricate, I caught sight of him flying down a ride bordered by dark green box-trees, against which his white hunting coat showed so vividly; but now he was alone, and riding in a direction which each moment carried him farther from the chase, and entangled him more deeply in the forest.

Supposing that he had made a bad cast and was in error, I dashed the spurs into my horse, and galloped after him; then, finding that he still held his own, and that I did not overtake him, but that, on the contrary, he was riding at the top of his speed, I called to him: "You are in error, sire, I think!" I cried. "The hounds are the other way!"

He heard, for he raised his hand, and, without turning his head, made me a sign; but whether of assent or denial, I could not tell. And he still held on his course. Then, for a moment, I fancied that his horse had got the better of him, and was running away; but no sooner had the thought occurred to me than I saw that he was spurting it, and exciting it to its utmost speed, so that we reached the end of that ride, and rushed through another and still another, always making, I did not fail to note, for the most retired part of the forest.

A little more moderately. "I saw her gallop out of the patch of rocks at the end of the Dornoir—where the trees begin. She did not heed the line of the hounds, but turned straight down the boxwood ride; and, after that, led as I followed. Did you not see her?"

"No, sire," I said, inexpressibly alarmed—I could take it for nothing but fantasy—I saw no one.

"And I saw her as clearly as I see you," he answered. "She wore the yellow ostrich feather she wore last year, and rode her favorite chestnut horse with a white stocking. But I could have sworn to her by her figure alone; and she waved her hand to me."

"But, sire, out of the many ladies riding to day—"

"There is no lady wearing a yellow feather," he answered passionately. "And the horse! And I knew her, man! Besides, she waved to me! And for the others—why should they turn from the hunt and take to the woods?"

I could not answer this, but I looked at him in fear; for, as it was impossible that the Princess de Conde could behave, I saw no alternative but to think him smitten with madness. The extravagance of the passion which he had entertained for her, and the wrath into which the news of her flight with her young husband had thrown him, to say nothing of the depression under which he had since suffered, rendered the idea not so unlikely as it now seems. At any rate, I was driven for a moment to entertain it; and gazed at him in silence, a prey to the most dreadful apprehensions.

We stood in a narrow ride, bordered by evergreens, with which that part of the forest is planted; and, but for the songs of the birds, the stillness would have been absolute. On a sudden the King removed his eyes from me, and, walking his horse a pace or two along the ride, uttered a cry of joy.

"He is waiting at the gate of the farthest court," he answered politely, his keen eyes reverting, with eager curiosity, to the door by which the King had disappeared.

I could not refuse, and went to her. "The King has returned early, M. le Duc?" she said.

"Yes, madame," I answered. "He had a fancy to discuss affairs to day and we lost the hounds."

"I had the honor, madame," I said, "to do not seem to have agreed very well?" she said smiling.

"Madame," I answered bluntly, "his Majesty has no more faithful servant; but we do not always agree."

"I will go," I said, rising. "He is with the Queen, your Excellency," he continued.

"I thought no evil; and, finding one of the Queen's Italian pages at the door waiting to conduct me, I followed him across the court that lay between my lodgings and the apartments. Two or three of the King's gentlemen were in the anteroom when I arrived, and Varennes, who was standing by one of the fire places toying with a hound, made me a face of dismay; he could not speak, owing to the company.

"I did not contradict him, he rather as we were now close to the kennels, and I was anxious to allay his excitement, that it might not be detected by the keen eyes that lay in wait for us, and so add to the gossip which his early return must give rise. I hoped that at that hour he might enter unperceived, by way of the kennels and the little staircase; but in this I was disappointed, the beauty of the day having tempted a number of ladies, and others who had not hunted, to the terrace by the canal, whence, walking up and down, their fans and petticoats fluttering in the sunshine, and their laughter and chatter filling the air, they were able to watch our approach at their leisure.

"Unfortunately, Henry had no longer the patience and self control needful for such a reconnoitre. He dismounted with a dark and peevish air, and, heedless of the staring, bowing throng, strode up the steps. Two or three, who stood high in favor, put themselves forward to catch a smile or a word but he vouchsafed neither. He walked through them with a sour air, and entered the chateau with a precipitation that left all tongues wagging in his wake."

"To add to the misfortune, something I forget what—meantime a moment, and that cost me dear. Before I could cross the terrace, Concini, the Italian, came up, and, saluting me, said that the Queen desired to speak to me."

"The Queen?" I said, doubtfully, foreseeing trouble.

"She is waiting at the gate of the farthest court," he answered politely, his keen eyes reverting, with eager curiosity, to the door by which the King had disappeared.

"I could not refuse, and went to her. "The King has returned early, M. le Duc?" she said.

"Yes, madame," I answered. "He had a fancy to discuss affairs to day and we lost the hounds."

"I tell you I saw her this morning!" he answered. "Go, learn all you can! Find her! Find her! If she has returned, I will—God knows what I will do!" he cried, in a voice shamefully broken.

"Go; and send Varennes to me. I shall soon let you know all."

"I would have remonstrated with him, but he was in mood to bear it; and, sad at heart, I withdrew, feeling the perplexity, which the situation caused me, a less heavy burden than the pain with which I viewed the change that had of late come over my master; converting him from the gayest and most debonnaire of men into this morose and solitary dreamer. Here, had I felt any temptation to moralize on the tyranny of passion, was the occasion; but, as the farther I left the closet behind me the more intense became the crisis, the present soon reassured its power. Reflecting that Henry, in this state of uncertainty, was capable of the wildest acts, and that not less was to be feared from his imprudence than from the Queen's resentment, I eddged my brains to explain the retrograde of the morning; but as the courier, whom I questioned, confirmed the report of my agents, and asseverated most confidently that he had left Madame in Brussels, I was flung back on the alternative of an accidental resemblance. This, however, which stood for a time as the most probable solution, scarcely accounted for the woman's peculiar conduct, and quite fell to the ground when La Trappe, making cautious inquiries, ascertained that the lady hunting that day had worn a yellow feather. Again, therefore, I found myself at a loss; and the dejection of the King, and the Queen's ill-temper giving

a fiery glance at the Cordovan curtain that hid the door, was so natural to her character; that I found myself leaning to the latter supposition. Still, in grave doubt what part Bassompierre was to play, I looked for his coming as anxiously as anyone. And probably the King shared this feeling; but he affected indifference, and continued to sit over the fire with an air of mingled scorn and peevishness.

"At length Bassompierre entered, and seeing the King, advanced with an open brow that persuaded me, at least, of his innocence. Attacked on the instant, however, by the Queen, and taken by surprise, as it were, between two fires—though the King kept silence, and merely shrugged his shoulders—his countenance fell. He was at that time one of the handsomest gallants about the Court, 39 years old, and the darling of women, but at this his aplomb failed him, and with it my heart sank also.

"Answer, sire!" answered the Queen. "And without subterfuge! Who was it, sir, whom you saw come from the forest this morning?"

"In one word!" "I will permit you to answer," she Queen exclaimed.

for the cry of surprise which broke from the Queen.

"Why, this is Caterina!" she cried. "Where is the child?"

Someone pushed forward Mademoiselle Paleotti, sister-in-law to Madame Paleotti, the Queen's first chamber-woman. She was barely out of her teens, and, ordinarily, was a pretty girl; but the moment I saw her dead white face, framed in a circle of fluttering fans and pitiless, sparkling eyes, I discovered tragedy in the face; and that M. de Bassompierre was acting in a drama to which only he and one other held the key. The contrast between the girl's blanced face and the beauty and glitter in the midst of which she stood struck others, so that, before another word was said, I caught the gasp of surprise that passed through the room; nor was I the only one who drew nearer.

"Why, girl," the Queen said, "this is the ring I gave you on my birthday. When did you lose it? And why have you made a secret of it?"

Mademoiselle stood speechless, but Madame, her sister-in-law answered for her. "Doubtless she was afraid that your Majesty would think her careless," she answered.

"I did not ask you," the Queen rejoined.

She spoke harshly and suspiciously, looking from the ring to the trembling girl. The silence was such that the chatter of the pages in the anteroom could be heard. Still Mademoiselle stood dumb and confounded.

that probably possessed him in the silence of his closet. It was enough for me that the Italians' plot had failed, and that the danger of a rupture between the King and Queen, which these miscreants desired, and I had felt to be so great and imminent, was, for this time, overpast.

The Paleottis were punished, being sent home in disgrace, and a penalty, which, doubtless, they felt more keenly.

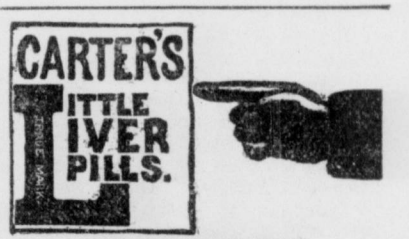


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