

# **THE CHARTERHOUSE OF PARMA**

**VOLUME TWO**

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

While Fabrizio was in pursuit of love, in a village near Parma, the Fiscal General Rassi, who did not know that he was so near, continued to treat his case as though he had been a Liberal: he pretended to be unable to find—or, rather, he intimidated—the witnesses for the defence; and finally, after the most ingenious operations, carried on for nearly a year, and about two months after Fabrizio's final return to Bologna, on a certain Friday, the Marchesa Raversi, mad with joy, announced publicly in her drawing-room that next day the sentence which had just been pronounced, in the last hour, on young del Dongo would be presented to the Prince for his signature and approved by him. A few minutes later the Duchessa was informed of this utterance by her enemy.

"The Conte must be extremely ill served by his agents!" she said to herself; "only this morning he thought that the sentence could not be passed for another week. Perhaps he would not be sorry to see my young Grand Vicar kept out of Parma; but," she added, breaking into song, "we shall see him come again; and one day he will be our Archbishop." The Duchessa rang:

"Collect all the servants in the waiting-room," she told her footman, "including the kitchen staff; go to the town commandant and get the necessary permit to procure four post horses, and have those horses harnessed to my landau within half an hour." All the women of the household were set to work packing trunks: the Duchessa hastily chose a travelling dress, all without sending any

word to the Conte; the idea of playing a little joke on him sent her into a transport of joy.

"My friends," she said to the assembled servants, "I learn that my poor nephew is to be condemned in his absence for having had the audacity to defend his life against a raging madman; I mean Giletti, who was trying to kill him. You have all of you had opportunities of seeing how mild and inoffensive Fabrizio's nature is. Rightly indignant at this atrocious outrage, I am going to Florence; I leave for each of you ten years' wages; if you are in distress, write to me, and, so long as I have a sequin, there will be something for you."

The Duchessa meant exactly what she said, and, at her closing words, the servants dissolved in tears; her eyes too were moist: she added in a voice faint with emotion: "Pray to God for me and for Monsignor Fabrizio del Dongo, First Grand Vicar of the Diocese, who to-morrow morning is going to be condemned to the galleys, or, which would be less stupid, to the penalty of death."

The tears of the servants flowed in double volume, and gradually changed into cries that were almost seditious; the Duchessa stepped into her carriage and drove to the Prince's Palace. Despite the unusual hour, she sent in a request for an audience by General Fontana, the Aide-de-Camp in waiting; she was by no means in court dress, a fact which threw this Aide-de-Camp into a profound stupor. As for the Prince, he was not at all surprised, still less annoyed by this request for an audience. "We shall see tears flowing from fine eyes," he said to himself, rubbing his hands. "She comes to sue for pardon; at last that proud beauty is going to humble herself! She was, really, too insupportable with her little airs of independence! Those speaking eyes seemed always to be

saying to me, when the slightest thing offended her: 'Naples or Milan would have very different attractions as a residence from your little town of Parma.' In truth, I do not reign over Naples, nor over Milan; but now at last this great lady is coming to ask me for something which depends upon me alone, and which she is burning to obtain; I always thought that nephew's coming here would bring me some advantage."

### *THE FAREWELL AUDIENCE*

While the Prince was smiling at these thoughts, and giving himself up to all these agreeable anticipations, he walked up and down his cabinet, at the door of which General Fontana remained standing stiff and erect like a soldier presenting arms. Seeing the sparkling eyes of the Prince, and remembering the Duchessa's travelling dress, he imagined a dissolution of the Monarchy. His bewilderment knew no bounds when he heard the Prince say: "Ask the Signora Duchessa to wait for a quarter of an hour." The General Aide-de-Camp made his half-turn, like a soldier on parade; the Prince was still smiling: "Fontana is not accustomed," he said to himself, "to see that proud Duchessa kept waiting. The face of astonishment with which he is going to tell her about the *quarter of an hour to wait* will pave the way for the touching tears which this cabinet is going to see her shed." This quarter of an hour was exquisite for the Prince; he walked up and down with a firm and steady pace; he reigned. "It will not do at this point to say anything that is not perfectly correct; whatever my feelings for the Duchessa may be, I must never forget that she is one of the greatest ladies of my court. How used Louis XIV to speak to the Princesses his

daughters, when he had occasion to be displeased with them?" And his eyes came to rest on the portrait of the Great King.

The amusing thing was that the Prince never thought of asking himself whether he should shew clemency to Fabrizio, or what form that clemency should take. Finally, at the end of twenty minutes, the faithful Fontana presented himself again at the door, but without saying a word. "The Duchessa Sanseverina may enter," cried the Prince, with a theatrical air. "Now for the tears," he added inwardly, and, as though to prepare himself for such a spectacle, took out his handkerchief.

Never had the Duchessa been so gay or so pretty; she did not seem five-and-twenty. Seeing her light and rapid little step scarcely brush the carpet, the poor Aide-de-Camp was on the point of losing his reason altogether.

"I have a thousand pardons to ask of Your Serene Highness," said the Duchessa in her light and gay little voice; "I have taken the liberty of presenting myself before him in a costume which is not exactly conventional, but Your Highness has so accustomed me to his kindnesses that I have ventured to hope that he will be pleased to accord me this pardon also."

The Duchessa spoke quite slowly so as to give herself time to enjoy the spectacle of the Prince's face; it was delicious, by reason of the profound astonishment and of the traces of the grand manner which the position of his head and arms still betrayed. The Prince sat as though struck by a thunderbolt; in a shrill and troubled little voice he exclaimed from time to time, barely articulating the words: "*What's that! What's that!*" The Duchessa, as though out of respect,

having ended her compliment, left him ample time to reply; then went on:

"I venture to hope that Your Serene Highness deigns to pardon me the incongruity of my costume"; but, as she said the words, her mocking eyes shone with so bright a sparkle that the Prince could not endure it; he studied the ceiling, an act which with him was the final sign of the most extreme embarrassment.

*"What's that! What's that!"* he said again; then he had the good fortune to hit upon a phrase:—"Signora Duchessa, pray be seated"; he himself drew forward a chair for her, not ungraciously. The Duchessa was by no means insensible to this courtesy, she moderated the petulance of her gaze.

*"What's that! What's that!"* the Prince once more repeated, moving uneasily in his chair, in which one would have said that he could find no solid support.

"I am going to take advantage of the cool night air to travel by post," went on the Duchessa, "and as my absence may be of some duration, I have not wished to leave the States of His Serene Highness without thanking him for all the kindnesses which, in the last five years, he has deigned to shew me." At these words the Prince at last understood; he grew pale; he was the one man in the world who really suffered when he saw himself proved wrong in his calculations. Then he assumed an air of grandeur quite worthy of the portrait of Louis XIV which hung before his eyes. "Very good," thought the Duchessa, "there is a man."

"And what is the reason for this sudden departure?" said the Prince in a fairly firm tone.

"I have long had the plan in my mind," replied the Duchessa, "and a little insult which has been offered to *Monsignor* Del Dongo, whom to-morrow they are going to sentence to death or to the galleys, makes me hasten my departure."

"And to what town are you going?"

"To Naples, I think." She added as she rose to her feet: "It only remains for me to take leave of Your Serene Highness and to thank him most humbly for his *former* kindnesses." She, in turn, spoke with so firm an air that the Prince saw that in two minutes all would be over; once the sensation of her departure had occurred, he knew that no further arrangement was possible; she was not a woman to retrace her steps. He ran after her.

"But you know well, Signora Duchessa," he said, taking her hand, "that I have always felt a regard for you, a regard to which it rested only with you to give another name. A murder has been committed; that is a fact which no one can deny; I have entrusted the sifting of the evidence to my best judges. . . ."

At these words the Duchessa rose to her full height; every sign of respect and even of urbanity disappeared in the twinkling of an eye; the outraged woman became clearly apparent, and the outraged woman addressing a creature whom she knew to have broken faith with her. It was with an expression of the most violent anger, and indeed of contempt that she said to the Prince, dwelling on every word:

"I am leaving the States of Your Serene Highness for ever, so as never to hear the names of the Fiscal Rassi and of the other infamous assassins who have condemned my nephew and so many others to death; if Your Serene Highness does not wish to



introduce a feeling of bitterness into the last moments that I shall pass in the presence of a Prince who is courteous and intelligent when he is not led astray, I beg him most humbly not to recall to me the thought of those infamous judges who sell themselves for a thousand scudi or a Cross."

The admirable—and, above all, genuine—accent in which these words were uttered made the Prince shudder; he feared for a moment to see his dignity compromised by an accusation even more direct, but on the whole his sensation soon became one of pleasure; he admired the Duchessa; her face and figure attained at that moment to a sublime beauty. "Great God! How beautiful she is!" the Prince said to himself; "one ought to make some concessions to a woman who is so unique, when there probably is not another like her in the whole of Italy. Oh well, with a little policy it might not be impossible one day to make her my mistress: there is a wide gulf between a creature like this and that doll of a Marchesa Balbi, who moreover robs my poor subjects of at least three hundred thousand francs every year. . . . But did I hear aright?" he thought suddenly; "she said: 'Condemned my nephew and so many others.'" Then his anger boiled over, and it was with a stiffness worthy of his supreme rank that the Prince said, after an interval of silence: "And what would one have to do to make the Signora not leave us?"

"Something of which you are not capable," replied the Duchessa in an accent of the most bitter irony and the most unconcealed contempt.

The Prince was beside himself, but his professional training as an Absolute Sovereign gave him the strength to overcome his first impulse. "I must have this woman," he said to himself; "so much I

owe to myself, then she must be made to die of shame. . . . If she leaves this cabinet, I shall never see her again." But, mad with rage and hatred as he was at this moment, where was he to find an answer that would at once satisfy the requirements of what he owed to himself and induce the Duchessa not to abandon his court immediately? "She cannot," he said to himself, "repeat or turn to ridicule a gesture," and he placed himself between the Duchessa and the door of his cabinet. Presently he heard a tap at this door.

"Who is the creature," he cried, shouting with the full force of his lungs, "who is the creature who comes here to thrust his fatuous presence upon me?" Poor General Fontana shewed a pallid face of complete discomfiture, and it was with the air of a man in his last agony that he stammered these inarticulate words: "His Excellency the Conte Mosca solicits the honour of being introduced."

"Let him come in," said, or rather shouted the Prince, and, as Mosca bowed:

"Well," he said to him, "here is the Signora Duchessa Sanseverina, who informs me that she is leaving Parma immediately to go and settle at Naples, and who, incidentally, is being most impertinent to me."

"What!" said Mosca turning pale.

"Oh! So you did not know of this plan of departure?"

"Not a word; I left the Signora at six o'clock, happy and content."

This statement had an incredible effect on the Prince. First of all he looked at Mosca; his increasing pallor shewed the Prince that he was telling the truth and was in no way an accomplice of the

Duchessa's desperate action. "In that case," he said to himself, "I lose her for ever; pleasure and vengeance, all goes in a flash. At Naples she will make epigrams with her nephew Fabrizio about the great fury of the little Prince of Parma." He looked at the Duchessa: the most violent scorn and anger were disputing the possession of her heart; her eyes were fixed at that moment on Conte Mosca, and the exquisite curves of that lovely mouth expressed the bitterest disdain. The whole face seemed to be saying: "Vile courtier!" "So," thought the Prince after he had examined her, "I lose this means of bringing her back to my country. At this moment again, if she leaves this cabinet, she is lost to me; God knows the things she will say about my judges at Naples. . . . And with that spirit, and that divine power of persuasion which heaven has bestowed on her, she will make everyone believe her. I shall be obliged to her for the reputation of a ridiculous tyrant, who gets up in the middle of the night to look under his bed. . . ." Then, by an adroit move and as though he were intending to walk up and down the room to reduce his agitation, the Prince took his stand once again in front of the door of the cabinet; the Conte was on his right, at a distance of three paces, pale, shattered, and trembling so that he was obliged to seek support from the back of the armchair in which the Duchessa had been sitting during the earlier part of the audience, and which the Prince in a moment of anger had pushed across the floor. The Conte was in love. "If the Duchessa goes, I follow her," he said to himself; "but will she want me in her train? That is the question."

On the Prince's left, the Duchessa, erect, her arms folded and pressed to her bosom, was looking at him with an admirable impatience: a complete and intense pallor had taken the place of

the vivid colours which a moment earlier animated that sublime face.

The Prince, in contrast to the other two occupants of the room, had a red face and a troubled air; his left hand played convulsively with the Cross attached to the Grand Cordon of his Order which he wore under his coat: with his right hand he caressed his chin.

"What is to be done?" he asked the Conte, without knowing quite what he himself was doing, and carried away by the habit of consulting this other in everything.

"I can think of nothing, truly, Serene Highness," replied the Conte with the air of a man yielding up his last breath. It was all he could do to pronounce the words of his answer. The tone of his voice gave the Prince the first consolation that his wounded pride had received during this audience, and this grain of happiness furnished him with a speech that gratified his vanity.

"Very well," he said, "I am the most reasonable of the three; I choose to make a complete elimination of my position in the world. I am going to speak *as a friend*"; and he added, with a fine smile of condescension, beautifully copied from the brave days of Louis XIV, "*like a friend speaking to friends*. Signora Duchessa," he went on, "what is to be done to make you forget an untimely resolution?"

"Truly, I can think of nothing," replied the Duchessa with a deep sigh, "truly, I can think of nothing, I have such a horror of Parma." There was no epigrammatic intention in this speech; one could see that sincerity itself spoke through her lips.

The Conte turned sharply towards her; his courtier's soul was scandalised; then he addressed a suppliant gaze to the Prince. With great dignity and coolness the Prince allowed a moment to pass; then, addressing the Conte:

"I see," he said, "that your charming friend is altogether beside herself; it is quite simple, she *adores* her nephew." And, turning towards the Duchessa, he went on with a glance of the utmost gallantry and at the same time with the air which one adopts when quoting a line from a play: "*What must one do to please those lovely eyes?*"

The Duchessa had had time for reflexion; in a firm and measured tone, and as though she were dictating her *ultimatum*, she replied:

"His Highness might write me a gracious letter, as he knows so well how to do; he might say to me that, not being at all convinced of the guilt of Fabrizio del Dongo, First Grand Vicar of the Archbishop, he will not sign the sentence when it is laid before him, and that these unjust proceedings shall have no consequences in the future."

"What, *unjust!*" cried the Prince, colouring to the whites of his eyes, and recovering his anger.

"That is not all," replied the Duchessa, with a Roman pride, "*this very evening*, and," she added, looking at the clock, "it is already a quarter past eleven,—this very evening His Serene Highness will send word to the Marchesa Raversi that he advises her to retire to the country to recover from the fatigue which must have been caused her by a certain prosecution of which she was

speaking in her drawing-room in the early hours of the evening." The Prince was pacing the floor of his cabinet like a madman.

"Did anyone ever see such a woman?" he cried. "She is wanting in respect for me!"

The Duchessa replied with inimitable grace:

"Never in my life have I had a thought of shewing want of respect for His Serene Highness; His Highness has had the extreme condescension to say that he was speaking *as a friend to friends*. I have, moreover, no desire to remain at Parma," she added, looking at the Conte with the utmost contempt. This look decided the Prince, hitherto highly uncertain, though his words had seemed to promise a pledge; he paid little attention to words.

There was still some further discussion; but at length Conte Mosca received the order to write the gracious note solicited by the Duchessa. He omitted the phrase: *these unjust proceedings shall have no consequences in the future*. "It is enough," the Conte said to himself, "that the Prince shall promise not to sign the sentence which will be laid before him." The Prince thanked him with a quick glance as he signed.

The Conte was greatly mistaken; the Prince was tired and would have signed anything. He thought that he was getting well out of the difficulty, and the whole affair was coloured in his eyes by the thought: "If the Duchessa goes, I shall find my court become boring within a week." The Conte noticed that his master altered the date to that of the following day. He looked at the clock: it pointed almost to midnight. The Minister saw nothing more in this correction of the date than a pedantic desire to show a proof of exactitude and good government. As for the banishment of the

Marchesa Raversi, he made no objection; the Prince took a particular delight in banishing people.

"General Fontana!" he cried, opening the door a little way.

The General appeared with a face shewing so much astonishment and curiosity, that a merry glance was exchanged by the Duchessa and Conte, and this glance made peace between them.

"General Fontana," said the Prince, "you will get into my carriage, which is waiting under the colonnade; you will go to the Marchesa Raversi's, you will send in your name; if she is in bed, you will add that you come from me, and, on entering her room, you will say these precise words and no others: 'Signora Marchesa Raversi, His Serene Highness requests you to leave to-morrow morning, before eight o'clock, for your *castello* at Velleja; His Highness will let you know when you may return to Parma.'"

The Prince's eyes sought those of the Duchessa, who, without giving him the thanks he expected, made him an extremely respectful curtsy, and swiftly left the room.

"What a woman!" said the Prince, turning to Conte Mosca.

The latter, delighted at the banishment of the Marchesa Raversi, which simplified all his ministerial activities, talked for a full half-hour like a consummate courtier; he sought to console his Sovereign's injured vanity, and did not take his leave until he saw him fully convinced that the historical anecdotes of Louis XIV included no fairer page than that with which he had just provided his own future historians.

On reaching home the Duchessa shut her doors, and gave orders that no one was to be admitted, not even the Conte. She

wished to be left alone with herself, and to consider for a little what idea she ought to form of the scene that had just occurred. She had acted at random and for her own immediate pleasure; but to whatever course she might have let herself be induced to take she would have clung with tenacity. She had not blamed herself in the least on recovering her coolness, still less had she repented; such was the character to which she owed the position of being still, in her thirty-seventh year, the best looking woman at court.

### *THE SERVANTS*

She was thinking at this moment of what Parma might have to offer in the way of attractions, as she might have done on returning after a long journey, so fully, between nine o'clock and eleven, had she believed that she was leaving the place for ever.

"That poor Conte did cut a ludicrous figure when he learned of my departure in the Prince's presence. . . . After all, he is a pleasant man, and has a very rare warmth of heart. He would have given up his Ministries to follow me. . . . But on the other hand, during five whole years, he has not had to find fault with me for a single aberration. How many women married before the altar could say as much to their lords and masters? It must be admitted that he is not self-important, he is no pedant; he gives one no desire to be unfaithful to him; when he is with me, he seems always to be ashamed of his power. . . . He cut a funny figure in the presence of his lord and master; if he was in the room now, I should kiss him. . . . But not for anything in the world would I undertake to amuse a Minister who had lost his portfolio; that is a malady which only death can cure, and . . . one which kills. What a misfortune it would be to become Minister when one was young! I must write to



him; it is one of the things that he ought to know officially before he quarrels with his Prince. . . . But I am forgetting my good servants."

The Duchessa rang. Her women were still at work packing trunks, the carriage had drawn up under the portico, and was being loaded; all the servants who had nothing else to do were gathered round this carriage, with tears in their eyes. Cecchina, who on great occasions, had the sole right to enter the Duchessa's room, told her all these details.

"Call them upstairs," said the Duchessa.

A moment later she passed into the waiting-room.

"I have been promised," she told them, "that the sentence passed on my nephew will not be signed by the Sovereign" (such is the term used in Italy), "and I am postponing my departure. We shall see whether my enemies have enough influence to alter this decision."

After a brief silence, the servants began to shout: "*Evviva la Signora Duchessa!*" and to applaud furiously. The Duchessa, who had gone into the next room, reappeared like an actress taking a *call*, made a little curtsy, full of grace, to her people, and said to them: "*My friends, I thank you.*" Had she said the word, all of them at that moment would have marched on the Palace to attack it. She beckoned to a postilion, an old smuggler and a devoted servant, who followed her.

"You will disguise yourself as a *contadino* in easy circumstances, you will get out of Parma as best you can, hire a *sediola* and proceed as quickly as possible to Bologna. You will

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