

## Chapter XI. The Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte.

The chateau of Vaux-le-Vicomte, situated about a league from Melun, had been built by Fouquet in 1655, at a time when there was a scarcity of money in France; Mazarin had taken all that there was, and Fouquet expended the remainder. However, as certain men have fertile, false, and useful vices, Fouquet, in scattering broadcast millions of money in the construction of this palace, had found a means of gathering, as the result of his generous profusion, three illustrious men together: Levau, the architect of the building; Lenotre, the designer of the gardens; and Lebrun, the decorator of the apartments. If the Chateau de Vaux possessed a single fault with which it could be reproached, it was its grand, pretentious character. It is even at the present day proverbial to calculate the number of acres of roofing, the restoration of which would, in our age, be the ruin of fortunes cramped and narrowed as the epoch itself. Vaux-le-Vicomte, when its magnificent gates, supported by caryatides, have been passed through, has the principal front of the main building opening upon a vast, so-called, court of honor, inclosed by deep ditches, bordered by a magnificent stone balustrade. Nothing could be more noble in appearance than the central forecourt raised upon the flight of steps, like a king upon his throne, having around it four pavilions at the angles, the immense Ionic columns of which rose majestically to the whole height of the building. The friezes ornamented with arabesques, and the pediments which crowned the pilasters, conferred richness and grace on every part of the building, while the domes which surmounted the whole added proportion and majesty. This mansion, built by a subject, bore a far greater resemblance to those royal residences which Wolsey fancied he was called upon to construct, in order to present them to his master from the fear of rendering him jealous. But if magnificence and splendor were displayed in any one particular part of this palace more than another,--if anything could be preferred to the wonderful arrangement of the interior, to the sumptuousness of the gilding, and to the profusion of the paintings and statues, it would be the park and gardens of Vaux. The jets d'eau, which were regarded as wonderful in 1653, are still so, even at the present time; the cascades awakened the admiration of kings and princes; and as for the famous grotto, the theme of so many poetical effusions, the residence of that illustrious nymph of Vaux, whom Pelisson made converse with La Fontaine, we must be spared the description of all its beauties. We will do as Despreaux did,--we will enter the park, the trees of which are of eight years' growth only--that is to say, in their present position--and whose summits even yet, as they proudly tower aloft, blushingly unfold their leaves to the earliest rays of the rising sun. Lenotre had hastened the pleasure of the Maecenas of his period; all the nursery-grounds had furnished trees whose growth had been accelerated by careful culture and the richest plant-food. Every tree in the neighborhood which presented a fair appearance of beauty or stature had been taken up by its roots and transplanted to the park. Fouquet could well afford to purchase trees to ornament his park, since he had

bought up three villages and their appurtenances (to use a legal word) to increase its extent. M. de Scudery said of this palace, that, for the purpose of keeping the grounds and gardens well watered, M. Fouquet had divided a river into a thousand fountains, and gathered the waters of a thousand fountains into torrents. This same Monsieur de Scudery said a great many other things in his "Clelie," about this palace of Valterre, the charms of which he describes most minutely. We should be far wiser to send our curious readers to Vaux to judge for themselves, than to refer them to "Clelie;" and yet there are as many leagues from Paris to Vaux, as there are volumes of the "Clelie."

This magnificent palace had been got ready for the reception of the greatest reigning sovereign of the time. M. Fouquet's friends had transported thither, some their actors and their dresses, others their troops of sculptors and artists; not forgetting others with their ready-mended pens,--floods of impromptus were contemplated. The cascades, somewhat rebellious nymphs though they were, poured forth their waters brighter and clearer than crystal: they scattered over the bronze triton and nereids their waves of foam, which glistened like fire in the rays of the sun. An army of servants were hurrying to and fro in squadrons in the courtyard and corridors; while Fouquet, who had only that morning arrived, walked all through the palace with a calm, observant glance, in order to give his last orders, after his intendants had inspected everything.

It was, as we have said, the 15th of August. The sun poured down its burning rays upon the heathen deities of marble and bronze: it raised the temperature of the water in the conch shells, and ripened, on the walls, those magnificent peaches, of which the king, fifty years later, spoke so regretfully, when, at Marly, on an occasion of a scarcity of the finer sorts of peaches being complained of, in the beautiful gardens there--gardens which had cost France double the amount that had been expended on Vaux--the great king observed to some one: "You are far too young to have eaten any of M. Fouquet's peaches."

Oh, fame! Oh, blazon of renown! Oh, glory of this earth! That very man whose judgment was so sound and accurate where merit was concerned--he who had swept into his coffers the inheritance of Nicholas Fouquet, who had robbed him of Lenotre and Lebrun, and had sent him to rot for the remainder of his life in one of the state prisons--merely remembered the peaches of that vanquished, crushed, forgotten enemy! It was to little purpose that Fouquet had squandered thirty millions of francs in the fountains of his gardens, in the crucibles of his sculptors, in the writing-desks of his literary friends, in the portfolios of his painters; vainly had he fancied that thereby he might be remembered. A peach--a blushing, rich-flavored fruit, nestling in the trellis work on the garden-wall, hidden beneath its long, green leaves,--this little vegetable production, that a dormouse would nibble up without a thought, was sufficient to recall to the memory of this great monarch the

mournful shade of the last surintendant of France.

With a perfect reliance that Aramis had made arrangements fairly to distribute the vast number of guests throughout the palace, and that he had not omitted to attend to any of the internal regulations for their comfort, Fouquet devoted his entire attention to the ensemble alone. In one direction Gourville showed him the preparations which had been made for the fireworks; in another, Moliere led him over the theater; at last, after he had visited the chapel, the salons, and the galleries, and was again going downstairs, exhausted with fatigue, Fouquet saw Aramis on the staircase. The prelate beckoned to him. The surintendant joined his friend, and, with him, paused before a large picture scarcely finished. Applying himself, heart and soul, to his work, the painter Lebrun, covered with perspiration, stained with paint, pale from fatigue and the inspiration of genius, was putting the last finishing touches with his rapid brush. It was the portrait of the king, whom they were expecting, dressed in the court suit which Percerin had condescended to show beforehand to the bishop of Vannes. Fouquet placed himself before this portrait, which seemed to live, as one might say, in the cool freshness of its flesh, and in its warmth of color. He gazed upon it long and fixedly, estimated the prodigious labor that had been bestowed upon it, and, not being able to find any recompense sufficiently great for this Herculean effort, he passed his arm round the painter's neck and embraced him. The surintendant, by this action, had utterly ruined a suit of clothes worth a thousand pistoles, but he had satisfied, more than satisfied, Lebrun. It was a happy moment for the artist; it was an unhappy moment for M. Percerin, who was walking behind Fouquet, and was engaged in admiring, in Lebrun's painting, the suit that he had made for his majesty, a perfect objet d'art, as he called it, which was not to be matched except in the wardrobe of the surintendant. His distress and his exclamations were interrupted by a signal which had been given from the summit of the mansion. In the direction of Melun, in the still empty, open plain, the sentinels of Vaux had just perceived the advancing procession of the king and the queens. His majesty was entering Melun with his long train of carriages and cavaliers.

"In an hour--" said Aramis to Fouquet.

"In an hour!" replied the latter, sighing.

"And the people who ask one another what is the good of these royal fetes!" continued the bishop of Vannes, laughing, with his false smile.

"Alas! I, too, who am not the people, ask myself the same thing."

"I will answer you in four and twenty hours, monseigneur. Assume a cheerful countenance, for it should be a day of true rejoicing."

"Well, believe me or not, as you like, D'Herblay," said the surintendant, with a swelling heart, pointing at the cortege of Louis, visible in the horizon, "he certainly loves me but very little, and I do not care much more for him; but I cannot tell you how it is, that since he is approaching my house--"

"Well, what?"

"Well, since I know he is on his way here, as my guest, he is more sacred than ever for me; he is my acknowledged sovereign, and as such is very dear to me."

"Dear? yes," said Aramis, playing upon the word, as the Abbe Terray did, at a later period, with Louis XV.

"Do not laugh, D'Herblay; I feel that, if he really seemed to wish it, I could love that young man."

"You should not say that to me," returned Aramis, "but rather to M. Colbert."

"To M. Colbert!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Why so?"

"Because he would allow you a pension out of the king's privy purse, as soon as he becomes surintendant," said Aramis, preparing to leave as soon as he had dealt this last blow.

"Where are you going?" returned Fouquet, with a gloomy look.

"To my own apartment, in order to change my costume, monseigneur."

"Whereabouts are you lodging, D'Herblay?"

"In the blue room on the second story."

"The room immediately over the king's room?"

"Precisely."

"You will be subject to very great restraint there. What an idea to condemn yourself to a room where you cannot stir or move about!"

"During the night, monseigneur, I sleep or read in my bed."

"And your servants?"

"I have but one attendant with me. I find my reader quite sufficient. Adieu, monseigneur; do not overfatigue yourself; keep yourself fresh for

the arrival of the king."

"We shall see you by and by, I suppose, and shall see your friend Du Vallon also?"

"He is lodging next to me, and is at this moment dressing."

And Fouquet, bowing, with a smile, passed on like a commander-in-chief who pays the different outposts a visit after the enemy has been signaled in sight. [2]