

Chapter 22

The Journey.

The next day being agreed upon for the departure, the king, at eleven o'clock precisely, descended the grand staircase with the two queens and Madame, in order to enter his carriage drawn by six horses, that were pawing the ground in impatience at the foot of the staircase. The whole court awaited the royal appearance in the *_Fer-a-cheval_* crescent, in their travelling costumes; the large number of saddled horses and carriages of ladies and gentlemen of the court, surrounded by their attendants, servants, and pages, formed a spectacle whose brilliancy could scarcely be equalled. The king entered his carriage with the two queens; Madame was in the same one with Monsieur. The maids of honor followed their example, and took their seats, two by two, in the carriages destined for them. The weather was exceedingly warm; a light breeze, which, early in the morning, all had thought would have proved sufficient to cool the air, soon became fiercely heated by the rays of the sun, although it was hidden behind the clouds, and filtered through the heated vapor which rose from the ground like a scorching wind, bearing particles of fine dust against the faces of the travelers.

Madame was the first to complain of the heat. Monsieur's only reply was to throw himself back in the carriage as though about to faint, and to inundate himself with scents and perfumes, uttering the deepest sighs all the while; whereupon Madame said to him, with her most amiable expression: - "Really, Monsieur, I fancied that you would have been polite enough, on account of the terrible heat, to have left me my

carriage to myself, and to have performed the journey yourself on horseback."

"Ride on horseback!" cried the prince, with an accent of dismay which showed how little idea he had of adopting this unnatural advice; "you cannot suppose such a thing, Madame! My skin would peel off if I were to expose myself to such a burning breeze as this."

Madame began to laugh.

"You can take my parasol," she said.

"But the trouble of holding it!" replied Monsieur, with the greatest coolness; "besides, I have no horse."

"What, no horse?" replied the princess, who, if she did not secure the solitude she required, at least obtained the amusement of teasing. "No horse! You are mistaken, Monsieur; for I see your favorite bay out yonder."

"My bay horse!" exclaimed the prince, attempting to lean forward to look out of the door; but the movement he was obliged to make cost him so much trouble that he soon hastened to resume his immobility.

"Yes," said Madame; "your horse, led by M. de Malicorne."

"Poor beast," replied the prince; "how warm it must be!"

And with these words he closed his eyes, like a man on the point of death. Madame, on her side, reclined indolently in the other corner of the carriage, and closed her eyes also, not, however, to sleep, but to think more at her ease. In the meantime the king, seated in the front seat of his carriage, the back of which he had yielded up to the two queens, was a prey to that feverish contrariety experienced by anxious lovers, who, without being able to quench their ardent thirst, are ceaselessly desirous of seeing the loved object, and then go away partially satisfied, without perceiving they have acquired a more insatiable thirst than ever. The king, whose carriage headed the procession, could not from the place he occupied perceive the carriages of the ladies and maids of honor, which followed in a line behind it. Besides, he was obliged to answer the eternal questions of the young queen, who, happy to have with her "_her dear husband_," as she called him in utter forgetfulness of royal etiquette, invested him with all her affection, stifled him with her attentions, afraid that some one might come to take him from her, or that he himself might suddenly take a fancy to quit her society. Anne of Austria, whom nothing at that moment occupied except the occasional cruel throbbings in her bosom, looked pleased and delighted, and although she perfectly realized the king's impatience, tantalizingly prolonged his sufferings by unexpectedly resuming the conversation at the very moment the king, absorbed in his own reflections, began to muse over his secret attachment. Everything seemed to combine - not alone the little teasing attentions of the queen,

but also the queen-mother's interruptions - to make the king's position almost insupportable; for he knew not how to control the restless longings of his heart. At first, he complained of the heat - a complaint merely preliminary to others, but with sufficient tact to prevent Maria Theresa guessing his real object. Understanding the king's remark literally, she began to fan him with her ostrich plumes. But the heat passed away, and the king then complained of cramps and stiffness in his legs, and as the carriages at that moment stopped to change horses, the queen said: - "Shall I get out with you? I too feel tired of sitting. We can walk on a little distance; the carriage will overtake us, and we can resume our places presently."

The king frowned; it is a hard trial a jealous woman makes her husband submit to whose fidelity she suspects, when, although herself a prey to jealousy, she watches herself so narrowly that she avoids giving any pretext for an angry feeling. The king, therefore, in the present case, could not refuse; he accepted the offer, alighted from the carriage, gave his arm to the queen, and walked up and down with her while the horses were being changed. As he walked along, he cast an envious glance upon the courtiers, who were fortunate enough to be on horseback. The queen soon found out that the promenade she had suggested afforded the king as little pleasure as he had experienced from driving. She accordingly expressed a wish to return to her carriage, and the king conducted her to the door, but did not get in with her. He stepped back a few paces, and looked along the file of carriages for the purpose of recognizing the one in which he took so strong an interest. At the door of the sixth

carriage he saw La Valliere's fair countenance. As the king thus stood motionless, wrapt in thought, without perceiving that everything was ready, and that he alone was causing the delay, he heard a voice close beside him, addressing him in the most respectful manner. It was M. Malicorne, in a complete costume of an equerry, holding over his left arm the bridles of a couple of horses.

"Your majesty asked for a horse, I believe," he said.

"A horse? Have you one of my horses here?" inquired the king, trying to remember the person who addressed him, and whose face was not as yet familiar to him.

"Sire," replied Malicorne, "at all events I have a horse here which is at your majesty's service."

And Malicorne pointed at Monsieur's bay horse, which Madame had observed. It was a beautiful creature royally caparisoned.

"This is not one of my horses, monsieur," said the king.

"Sire, it is a horse out of his royal highness's stables; but he does not ride when the weather is as hot as it is now."

Louis did not reply, but approached the horse, which stood pawing the ground with its foot. Malicorne hastened to hold the stirrup for him,

but the king was already in the saddle. Restored to good-humor by this lucky accident, the king hastened towards the queen's carriage, where he was anxiously expected; and notwithstanding Maria Theresa's thoughtful and preoccupied air, he said: "I have been fortunate enough to find this horse, and I intend to avail myself of it. I felt stifled in the carriage. Adieu, ladies."

Then bending gracefully over the arched neck of his beautiful steed, he disappeared in a second. Anne of Austria leaned forward, in order to look after him as he rode away; he did not get very far, for when he reached the sixth carriage, he reined in his horse suddenly and took off his hat. He saluted La Valliere, who uttered a cry of surprise as she saw him, blushing at the same time with pleasure. Montalais, who occupied the other seat in the carriage, made the king a most respectful bow. And then, with all the tact of a woman, she pretended to be exceedingly interested in the landscape, and withdrew herself into the left-hand corner. The conversation between the king and La Valliere began, as all lovers' conversations generally do, namely, by eloquent looks and by a few words utterly devoid of common sense. The king explained how warm he had felt in his carriage, so much so indeed that he could almost regard the horse he then rode as a blessing thrown in his way. "And," he added, "my benefactor is an exceedingly intelligent man, for he seemed to guess my thoughts intuitively. I have now only one wish, that of learning the name of the gentleman who so cleverly assisted his king out of his dilemma, and extricated him from his cruel position."

Montalais, during this colloquy, the first words of which had awakened her attention, had slightly altered her position, and contrived so as to meet the king's look as he finished his remark. It followed very naturally that the king looked inquiringly as much at her as at La Valliere; she had every reason to suppose that it was herself who was appealed to, and consequently might be permitted to answer. She therefore said: "Sire, the horse which your majesty is riding belongs to Monsieur, and was being led by one of his royal highness's gentlemen."

"And what is that gentleman's name, may I ask, mademoiselle?"

"M. de Malicorne, sire."

The name produced its usual effect, for the king repeated it smilingly.

"Yes, sire," replied Aure. "Stay, it is the gentleman who is galloping on my left hand;" and she pointed out Malicorne, who, with a very sanctified expression, was galloping by the side of the carriage, knowing perfectly well that they were talking of him at that very moment, but sitting in his saddle as if he were deaf and dumb.

"Yes," said the king, "that is the gentleman; I remember his face, and will not forget his name;" and the king looked tenderly at La Valliere.

Aure had now nothing further to do; she had let Malicorne's name fall; the soil was good; all that was now left to be done was to let the name

take root, and the event would bear fruit in due season. She consequently threw herself back in her corner, feeling perfectly justified in making as many agreeable signs of recognition as she liked to Malicorne, since the latter had had the happiness of pleasing the king. As will readily be believed, Montalais was not mistaken; and Malicorne, with his quick ear and his sly look, seemed to interpret her remark as "All goes on well," the whole being accompanied by a pantomimic action, which he fancied conveyed something resembling a kiss.

"Alas! mademoiselle," said the king, after a moment's pause, "the liberty and freedom of the country is soon about to cease; your attendance on Madame will be more strictly enforced, and we shall see each other no more."

"Your majesty is too much attached to Madame," replied Louise, "not to come and see her very frequently; and whenever your majesty may chance to pass across the apartments - "

"Ah!" said the king, in a tender voice, which was gradually lowered in its tone, "to perceive is not to see, and yet it seems that it would be quite sufficient for you."

Louise did not answer a syllable; a sigh filled her heart almost to bursting, but she stifled it.

"You exercise a great control over yourself," said the king to Louise, who smiled upon him with a melancholy expression. "Exert the strength you have in loving fondly," he continued, "and I will bless Heaven for having bestowed it on you."

La Valliere still remained silent, but raised her eyes, brimful of affection, toward the king. Louis, as if overcome by this burning glance, passed his hand across his forehead, and pressing the sides of his horse with his knees, made him bound several paces forward. La Valliere, leaning back in her carriage, with her eyes half closed, gazed fixedly upon the king, whose plumes were floating in the air; she could not but admire his graceful carriage, his delicate and nervous limbs which pressed his horse's sides, and the regular outline of his features, which his beautiful curling hair set off to great advantage, revealing occasionally his small and well-formed ear. In fact the poor girl was in love, and she reveled in her innocent affection. In a few moments the king was again by her side.

"Do you not perceive," he said, "how terribly your silence affects me? Oh! mademoiselle, how pitilessly inexorable you would become if you were ever to resolve to break off all acquaintance with any one; and then, too, I think you changeable; in fact - in fact, I dread this deep affection which fills my whole being."

"Oh! sire, you are mistaken," said La Valliere; "if ever I love, it will be for all my life."

"If you love, you say," exclaimed the king; "you do _not_ love now, then?"

She hid her face in her hands.

"You see," said the king, "that I am right in accusing you; you must admit you are changeable, capricious, a coquette, perhaps."

"Oh, no! sire, be perfectly satisfied as to that. No, I say again; no, no!"

"Promise me, then, that to me you will always be the same."

"Oh! always, sire."

"That you will never show any of that severity which would break my heart, none of that fickleness of manner which would be worse than death to me."

"Oh! no, no."

"Very well, then! but listen. I like promises, I like to place under the guarantee of an oath, under the protection of Heaven, in fact, everything which interests my heart and my affections. Promise me, or rather swear to me, that if in the life we are about to commence, a life which will be full of sacrifice, mystery, anxiety, disappointment, and

misunderstanding; swear to me that if we should in any way deceive, or misunderstand each other, or should judge each other unjustly, for that indeed would be criminal in love such as ours; swear to me, Louise - "

She trembled with agitation to the very depths of her heart; it was the first time she had heard her name pronounced in that manner by her royal lover. As for the king, taking off his glove, and placing his hand within the carriage, he continued: - "Swear, that never in all our quarrels will we allow one night even to pass by, if any misunderstanding should arise between us, without a visit, or at least a message, from either, in order to convey consolation and repose to the other."

La Valliere took her lover's burning hand between her own cool palms, and pressed it softly, until a movement of the horse, frightened by the proximity of the wheels, obliged her to abandon her happiness. She had vowed as he desired.

"Return, sire," she said, "return to the queen. I foresee a storm yonder, which threatens my peace of mind and yours."

Louis obeyed, saluted Mademoiselle de Montalais, and set off at a gallop to rejoin the queen. As he passed Monsieur's carriage, he observed that he was fast asleep, although Madame, on her part, was wide awake. As the king passed her she said, "What a beautiful horse, sire! Is it not Monsieur's bay horse?"

The young queen kindly asked, "Are you better now, sire?"