

Chapter 37

Hampton Court.

The revelation we have witnessed, that Montalais made to La Valliere, in a preceding chapter, very naturally makes us return to the principal hero of this tale, a poor wandering knight, roving about at the king's caprice. If our readers will be good enough to follow us, we will, in his company, cross that strait, more stormy than the Euripus, which separates Calais from Dover; we will speed across that green and fertile country, with its numerous little streams; through Maidstone, and many other villages and towns, each prettier than the other; and, finally, arrive at London. From thence, like bloodhounds following a track, after having ascertained that Raoul had made his first stay at Whitehall, his second at St. James's, and having learned that he had been warmly received by Monk, and introduced to the best society of Charles II.'s court, we will follow him to one of Charles II.'s summer residences near the lively little village of Kingston, at Hampton Court, situated on the Thames. The river is not, at that spot, the boastful highway which bears upon its broad bosom its thousands of travelers; nor are its waters black and troubled as those of Cocytus, as it boastfully asserts, "I, too, am cousin of the old ocean." No, at Hampton Court it is a soft and murmuring stream, with moss-fringed banks, reflecting, in its broad mirror, the willows and beeches which ornament its sides, and on which may occasionally be seen a light bark indolently reclining among the tall reeds, in a little creek formed of alders and forget-me-nots. The surrounding country on all sides smiled in happiness and wealth; the

brick cottages from whose chimneys the blue smoke was slowly ascending in wreaths, peeped forth from the belts of green holly which environed them; children dressed in red frocks appeared and disappeared amidst the high grass, like poppies bowed by the gentler breath of the passing breeze. The sheep, ruminating with half-closed eyes, lay lazily about under the shadow of the stunted aspens, while, far and near, the kingfishers, plumed with emerald and gold, skimmed swiftly along the surface of the water, like a magic ball heedlessly touching, as he passed, the line of his brother angler, who sat watching in his boat the fish as they rose to the surface of the sparkling stream. High above this paradise of dark shadows and soft light, rose the palace of Hampton Court, built by Wolsey - a residence the haughty cardinal had been obliged, timid courtier that he was, to offer to his master, Henry VIII., who had glowered with envy and cupidity at the magnificent new home. Hampton Court, with its brick walls, its large windows, its handsome iron gates, as well as its curious bell turrets, its retired covered walks, and interior fountains, like those of the Alhambra, was a perfect bower of roses, jasmine, and clematis. Every sense, sight and smell particularly, was gratified, and the reception-rooms formed a very charming framework for the pictures of love which Charles II. unrolled among the voluptuous paintings of Titian, of Pordenone and of Van Dyck; the same Charles whose father's portrait - the martyr king - was hanging in his gallery, and who could show upon the wainscots of the various apartments the holes made by the balls of the puritanical followers of Cromwell, when on the 24th of August, 1648, at the time they had brought Charles I. prisoner to Hampton Court. There it was that the king, intoxicated with pleasure and adventure, held his

court - he, who, a poet in feeling, thought himself justified in redeeming, by a whole day of voluptuousness, every minute which had been formerly passed in anguish and misery. It was not the soft green sward of Hampton Court - so soft that it almost resembled the richest velvet in the thickness of its texture - nor was it the beds of flowers, with their variegated hues which encircled the foot of every tree with rose-trees many feet in height, embracing most lovingly their trunks - nor even the enormous lime-trees, whose branches swept the earth like willows, offering a ready concealment for love or reflection beneath the shade of their foliage - it was none of these things for which Charles II. loved his palace of Hampton Court. Perhaps it might have been that beautiful sheet of water, which the cool breeze rippled like the wavy undulations of Cleopatra's hair, waters bedecked with cresses and white water-lilies, whose chaste bulbs coyly unfolding themselves beneath the sun's warm rays, reveal the golden gems which lie concealed within their milky petals - murmuring waters, on the bosom of which black swans majestically floated, and the graceful water-fowl, with their tender broods covered with silken down, darted restlessly in every direction, in pursuit of the insects among the reeds, or the fogs in their mossy retreats. Perhaps it might have been the enormous hollies, with their dark and tender green foliage; or the bridges uniting the banks of the canals in their embrace; or the fawns browsing in the endless avenues of the park; or the innumerable birds that hopped about the gardens, or flew from branch to branch, amidst the emerald foliage.

It might well have been any of these charms - for Hampton Court had them

all; and possessed, too, almost forests of white roses, which climbed and trailed along the lofty trellises, showering down upon the ground their snowy leaves rich with soft perfumery. But no, what Charles II. most loved in Hampton Court were the charming figures who, when midday was past, flitted to and fro along the broad terraces of the gardens; like Louis XIV., he had their wealth of beauties painted for his gallery by one of the great artists of the period - an artist who well knew the secret of transferring to canvas the rays of light which escaped from beaming eyes heavy laden with love and love's delights.

The day of our arrival at Hampton Court is almost as clear and bright as a summer's day in France; the atmosphere is heavy with the delicious perfume of geraniums, sweet-peas, seringas, and heliotrope scattered in profusion around. It is past midday, and the king, having dined after his return from hunting, paid a visit to Lady Castlemaine, the lady who was reputed at the time to hold his heart in bondage; and this proof of his devotion discharged, he was readily permitted to pursue his infidelities until evening arrived. Love and amusement ruled the entire court; it was the period when ladies would seriously interrogate their ruder companions as to their opinions upon a foot more or less captivating, according to whether it wore a pink or lilac silk stocking - for it was the period when Charles II. had declared that there was no hope of safety for a woman who wore green silk stockings, because Miss Lucy Stewart wore them of that color. While the king is endeavoring in all directions to inculcate others with his preferences on this point, we will ourselves bend our steps towards an avenue of beech-trees opposite

the terrace, and listen to the conversation of a young girl in a dark-colored dress, who is walking with another of about her own age dressed in blue. They crossed a beautiful lawn, from the center of which sprang a fountain, with the figure of a siren executed in bronze, and strolled on, talking as they went, towards the terrace, along which, looking out upon the park and interspersed at frequent intervals, were erected summer-houses, diverse in form and ornament; these summer-houses were nearly all occupied; the two young women passed on, the one blushing deeply, while the other seemed dreamily silent. At last, having reached the end of the terrace which looks on the river, and finding there a cool retreat, they sat down close to each other.

"Where are we going?" said the younger to her companion.

"My dear, we are going where you yourself led the way."

"I?"

"Yes, you; to the extremity of the palace, towards that seat yonder, where the young Frenchman is seated, wasting his time in sighs and lamentations."

Miss Mary Grafton hurriedly said, "No, no; I am not going there."

"Why not?"

"Let us go back, Lucy."

"Nay, on the contrary, let us go on, and have an explanation."

"What about?"

"About how it happens that the Vicomte de Bragelonne always accompanies you in all your walks, as you invariably accompany him in his."

"And you conclude either that he loves me, or that I love him?"

"Why not? - he is a most agreeable and charming companion. - No one hears me, I hope," said Lucy Stewart, as she turned round with a smile, which indicated, moreover, that her uneasiness on the subject was not extreme.

"No, no," said Mary, "the king is engaged in his summer-house with the Duke of Buckingham."

"Oh! a propos of the duke, Mary, it seems he has shown you great attention since his return from France; how is your own heart in that direction?"

Mary Grafton shrugged her shoulders with seeming indifference.

"Well, well, I will ask Bragelonne about it," said Stewart, laughing;

"let us go and find him at once."

"What for?"

"I wish to speak to him."

"Not yet, one word before you do: come, come, you who know so many of the king's secrets, tell me why M. de Bragelonne is in England?"

"Because he was sent as an envoy from one sovereign to another."

"That may be; but, seriously, although politics do not much concern us, we know enough to be satisfied that M. de Bragelonne has no mission of serious import here."

"Well, then, listen," said Stewart, with assumed gravity, "for your sake I am going to betray a state secret. Shall I tell you the nature of the letter which King Louis XIV. gave M. de Bragelonne for King Charles II.? I will; these are the very words: 'My brother, the bearer of this is a gentleman attached to my court, and the son of one whom you regard most warmly. Treat him kindly, I beg, and try and make him like England.'"

"Did it say that!"

"Word for word - or something very like it. I will not answer for the form, but the substance I am sure of."

"Well, and what conclusion do you, or rather what conclusion does the king, draw from that?"

"That the king of France has his own reasons for removing M. de Bragelonne, and for getting him married anywhere else than in France."

"So that, then, in consequence of this letter - "

"King Charles received M. de Bragelonne, as you are aware, in the most distinguished and friendly manner; the handsomest apartments in Whitehall

were allotted to him; and as you are the most valuable and precious person in his court, inasmuch as you have rejected his heart, - nay, do not blush, - he wished you to take a fancy to this Frenchman, and he was desirous to confer upon him so costly a prize. And this is the reason why you, the heiress of three hundred thousand pounds, a future duchess, so beautiful, so good, have been thrown in Bragelonne's way, in all the promenades and parties of pleasure to which he was invited. In fact it was a plot, - a kind of conspiracy."

Mary Grafton smiled with that charming expression which was habitual to her, and pressing her companion's arm, said: "Thank the king, Lucy."

"Yes, yes, but the Duke of Buckingham is jealous, so take care."

Hardly had she pronounced these words, when the duke appeared from one of

the pavilions on the terrace, and, approaching the two girls, with a smile, said, "You are mistaken, Miss Lucy; I am not jealous; and the proof, Miss Mary, is yonder, in the person of M. de Bragelonne himself, who ought to be the cause of my jealousy, but who is dreaming in pensive solitude. Poor fellow! Allow me to leave you for a few minutes, while I avail myself of those few minutes to converse with Miss Lucy Stewart, to whom I have something to say." And then, bowing to Lucy, he added, "Will you do me the honor to accept my hand, in order that I may lead you to the king, who is waiting for us?" With these words, Buckingham, still smiling, took Miss Stewart's hand, and led her away. When by herself, Mary Grafton, her head gently inclined towards her shoulder, with that indolent gracefulness of action which distinguishes young English girls, remained for a moment with her eyes fixed on Raoul, but as if uncertain what to do. At last, after first blushing violently, and then turning deadly pale, thus revealing the internal combat which assailed her heart, she seemed to make up her mind to adopt a decided course, and with a tolerably firm step, advanced towards the seat on which Raoul was reclining, buried in the profoundest meditation, as we have already said. The sound of Miss Mary's steps, though they could hardly be heard upon the green sward, awakened Raoul from his musing attitude; he turned round, perceived the young girl, and walked forward to meet the companion whom his happy destiny had thrown in his way.

"I have been sent to you, monsieur," said Mary Grafton; "will you take care of me?"

"To whom is my gratitude due, for so great a happiness?" inquired Raoul.

"To the Duke of Buckingham," replied Mary, affecting a gayety she did not really feel.

"To the Duke of Buckingham, do you say? - he who so passionately seeks your charming society! Am I really to believe you are serious, mademoiselle?"

"The fact is, monsieur, you perceive, that everything seems to conspire to make us pass the best, or rather the longest, part of our days together. Yesterday it was the king who desired me to beg you to seat yourself next to me at dinner; to-day, it is the Duke of Buckingham who begs me to come and place myself near you on this seat."

"And he has gone away in order to leave us together?" asked Raoul, with some embarrassment.

"Look yonder, at the turning of that path; he is just out of sight, with Miss Stewart. Are these polite attentions usual in France, monsieur le vicomte?"

"I cannot very precisely say what people do in France, mademoiselle, for I can hardly be called a Frenchman. I have resided in many countries, and almost always as a soldier; and then, I have spent a long period of my life in the country. I am almost a savage."

"You do not like your residence in England, I fear."

"I scarcely know," said Raoul, inattentively, and sighing deeply at the same time.

"What! you do not know?"

"Forgive me," said Raoul, shaking his head, and collecting his thoughts, "I did not hear you."

"Oh!" said the young girl, sighing in her turn, "how wrong the duke was to send me here!"

"Wrong!" said Raoul, "perhaps so; for I am but a rude, uncouth companion, and my society annoys you. The duke did, indeed, very wrong to send you."

"It is precisely," replied Mary Grafton, in a clear, calm voice, "because your society does not annoy me, that the duke was wrong to send me to you."

It was now Raoul's turn to blush. "But," he resumed, "how happens it that the Duke of Buckingham should send you to me; and why did you come?

the duke loves you, and you love him."

"No," replied Mary, seriously, "the duke does not love me, because he is in love with the Duchesse d'Orleans; and, as for myself, I have no affection for the duke."

Raoul looked at the young lady with astonishment.

"Are you a friend of the Duke of Buckingham?" she inquired.

"The duke has honored me by calling me so ever since we met in France."

"You are simple acquaintances, then?"

"No; for the duke is the most intimate friend of one whom I regard as a brother."

"The Duc de Guiche?"

"Yes."

"He who is in love with Madame la Duchesse d'Orleans?"

"Oh! What is that you are saying?"

"And who loves him in return," continued the young girl, quietly.

Raoul bent down his head, and Mary Grafton, sighing deeply, continued,

"They are very happy. But, leave me, Monsieur de Bragelonne, for the Duke of Buckingham has given you a very troublesome commission in offering me as a companion for your promenade. Your heart is elsewhere, and it is with the greatest difficulty you can be charitable enough to lend me your attention. Confess truly; it would be unfair on your part, vicomte, not to admit it."

"Madame, I do confess it."

She looked at him steadily. He was so noble and so handsome in his bearing, his eyes revealed so much gentleness, candor, and resolution, that the idea could not possibly enter her mind that he was either rudely discourteous, or a mere simpleton. She only perceived, clearly enough, that he loved another woman, and not herself, with the whole strength of his heart. "Ah! I now understand you," she said; "you have left your heart behind you in France." Raoul bowed. "The duke is aware of your affection?"

"No one knows it," replied Raoul.

"Why, therefore, do you tell me? Nay, answer me."

"I cannot."

"It is for me, then, to anticipate an explanation; you do not wish to tell me anything, because you are now convinced that I do not love the

duke; because you see that I possibly might have loved you; because you are a gentleman of noble and delicate sentiments; and because, instead of accepting, even were it for the mere amusement of the passing hour, a hand which is almost pressed upon you; and because, instead of meeting my smiles with a smiling lip, you, who are young, have preferred to tell me, whom men have called beautiful, 'My heart is over the sea - it is in France.' For this, I thank you, Monsieur de Bragelonne; you are, indeed, a noble-hearted, noble-minded man, and I regard you all the more for it, as a friend only. And now let us cease speaking of myself, and talk of your own affairs. Forget that I have ever spoken to you of myself, tell me why you are sad, and why you have become more than usually so during these past four days?"

Raoul was deeply and sensibly moved by these sweet and melancholy tones; and as he could not, at the moment, find a word to say, the young girl again came to his assistance.

"Pity me," she said. "My mother was born in France, and I can truly affirm that I, too, am French in blood, as well as in feeling; but the leaden atmosphere and characteristic gloom of England seem to weigh upon me. Sometimes my dreams are golden-hued and full of wonderful enjoyments, when suddenly a mist rises and overspreads my fancy, blotting them out forever. Such, indeed, is the case at the present moment. Forgive me; I have now said enough on that subject; give me your hand, and relate your griefs to me as a friend."

"You say you are French in heart and soul?"

"Yes, not only, I repeat it, that my mother was French, but, further, as my father, a friend of King Charles I., was exiled in France, I, during the trial of that prince, as well as during the Protector's life, was brought up in Paris; at the Restoration of King Charles II., my poor father returned to England, where he died almost immediately afterwards; and then the king created me a duchess, and has dowered me according to my rank.

"Have you any relations in France?" Raoul inquired, with the deepest interest.

"I have a sister there, my senior by seven or eight years, who was married in France, and was early left a widow; her name is Madame de Belliere. Do you know her?" she added, observing Raoul start suddenly.

"I have heard her name."

"She, too, loves with her whole heart; and her last letters inform me she is happy, and her affection is, I conclude, returned. I told you, Monsieur de Bragelonne, that although I possess half of her nature, I do not share her happiness. But let us now speak of yourself; whom do you love in France?"

"A young girl, as soft and pure as a lily."

"But if she loves you, why are you sad?"

"I have been told that she ceases to love me."

"You do not believe it, I trust?"

"He who wrote me so does not sign his letter."

"An anonymous denunciation! some treachery, be assured," said Miss Grafton.

"Stay," said Raoul, showing the young girl a letter which he had read over a thousand times; she took it from his hand and read as follows:

"VICOMTE, - You are perfectly right to amuse yourself yonder with the lovely faces of Charles II.'s court, for at Louis XIV.'s court, the castle in which your affections are enshrined is being besieged. Stay in London altogether, poor vicomte, or return without delay to Paris."

"There is no signature," said Miss Mary.

"None."

"Believe it not, then."

"Very good; but here is a second letter, from my friend De Guiche, which says, 'I am lying here wounded and ill. Return, Raoul, oh, return!'"

"What do you intend doing?" inquired the young girl, with a feeling of oppression at her heart.

"My intention, as soon as I received this letter, was immediately to take my leave of the king."

"When did you receive it?"

"The day before yesterday."

"It is dated Fontainebleau."

"A singular circumstance, do you not think, for the court is now at Paris? At all events, I would have set off; but when I mentioned my intention to the king, he began to laugh, and said to me, 'How comes it, monsieur l'ambassadeur, that you think of leaving? Has your sovereign recalled you?' I colored, naturally enough, for I was confused by the question; for the fact is, the king himself sent me here, and I have received no order to return."

Mary frowned in deep thought, and said, "Do you remain, then?"

"I must, mademoiselle."

"Do you ever receive any letters from her to whom you are so devoted?"

"Never."

"Never, do you say? Does she not love you, then?"

"At least, she has not written to me since my departure, although she used occasionally to write to me before. I trust she may have been prevented."

"Hush! the duke is coming."

And Buckingham at that moment was seen at the end of the walk, approaching towards them, alone and smiling; he advanced slowly, and held out his hands to them both. "Have you arrived at an understanding?" he said.

"About what?"

"About whatever might render you happy, dear Mary, and make Raoul less miserable."

"I do not understand you, my lord," said Raoul.

"That is my view of the subject, Miss Mary; do you wish me to mention it before M. de Bragelonne?" he added, with a smile.

"If you mean," replied the young girl, haughtily, "that I was not indisposed to love M. de Bragelonne, that is useless, for I have told him so myself."

Buckingham reflected for a moment, and, without seeming in any way discountenanced, as she expected, he said: "My reason for leaving you with M. de Bragelonne was, that I thoroughly knew your refined delicacy of feeling, no less than the perfect loyalty of your mind and heart, and I hoped that M. de Bragelonne's cure might be effected by the hands of a physician such as you are."

"But, my lord, before you spoke of M. de Bragelonne's heart, you spoke to me of your own. Do you mean to effect the cure of two hearts at the same time?"

"Perfectly true, madame; but you will do me the justice to admit that I have long discontinued a useless pursuit, acknowledging that my own wound is incurable."

"My lord," said Mary, collecting herself for a moment before she spoke, "M. de Bragelonne is happy, for he loves and is beloved. He has no need of such a physician as I can be."

"M. de Bragelonne," said Buckingham, "is on the very eve of experiencing a serious misfortune, and he has greater need than ever of sympathy and affection."

"Explain yourself, my lord," inquired Raoul, anxiously.

"No; gradually I will explain myself; but, if you desire it, I can tell Miss Grafton what you may not listen to yourself."

"My lord, you are putting me to the torture; you know something you wish to conceal from me?"

"I know that Miss Mary Grafton is the most charming object that a heart ill at ease could possibly meet with in its way through life."

"I have already told you that the Vicomte de Bragelonne loves elsewhere," said the young girl.

"He is wrong, then."

"Do you assume to know, my lord, that I am wrong?"

"Yes."

"Whom is it that he loves, then?" exclaimed the young girl.

"He loves a lady who is unworthy of him," said Buckingham, with that calm, collected manner peculiar to Englishmen.

Miss Grafton uttered a cry, which, together with the remark that Buckingham had that moment made, spread of De Bragelonne's features a deadly paleness, arising from the sudden surprise, and also from a vague fear of impending misfortune. "My lord," he exclaimed, "you have just pronounced words which compel me, without a moment's delay, to seek their explanation in Paris."

"You will remain here," said Buckingham, "because you have no right to leave; and no one has the right to quit the service of the king for that of any woman, even were she as worthy of being loved as Mary Grafton is."

"You will tell me all, then?"

"I will, on condition that you will remain."

"I will remain, if you will promise to speak openly and without reserve."

Thus far had their conversation proceeded, and Buckingham, in all probability, was on the point of revealing, not indeed all that had taken place, but at least all he was aware of, when one of the king's attendants appeared at the end of the terrace, and advanced towards the

summer-house where the king was sitting with Lucy Stewart. A courier followed him, covered with dust from head to foot, and who seemed as if he had but a few moments before dismounted from his horse.

"The courier from France! Madame's courier!" exclaimed Raoul, recognizing the princess's livery; and while the attendant and the courier advanced towards the king, Buckingham and Miss Grafton exchanged a look full of intelligence with each other.