

Chapter 38

The Courier from Madame.

Charles II. was busily engaged in proving, or in endeavoring to prove, to Miss Stewart that she was the only person for whom he cared at all, and consequently was avowing to her an affection similar to that which his ancestor Henry IV. had entertained for Gabrielle. Unfortunately for Charles II., he had hit upon an unlucky day, the very day Miss Stewart had taken it into her head to make him jealous, and therefore, instead of being touched by his offer, as the king had hoped, she laughed heartily.

"Oh! sire, sire," she cried, laughing all the while; "if I were to be unfortunate enough to ask you for a proof of the affection you possess, how easy it would be to see that you are telling a falsehood."

"Nay, listen to me," said Charles, "you know my cartoons by Raphael; you know whether I care for them or not; the whole world envies me their possession, as you well know also; my father commissioned Van Dyck to purchase them. Would you like me to send them to your house this very day?"

"Oh, no!" replied the young girl; "pray keep them yourself, sire; my house is far too small to accommodate such visitors."

"In that case you shall have Hampton Court to put the cartoons in."

"Be less generous, sire, and learn to love a little while longer, that is all I have to ask you."

"I shall never cease to love you; is not that enough?"

"You are smiling, sire."

"Do you wish me to weep?"

"No; but I should like to see you a little more melancholy."

"Thank Heaven, I have been so long enough; fourteen years of exile, poverty, and misery, I think I may well regard it as a debt discharged; besides, melancholy makes people look so plain."

"Far from that - for look at the young Frenchman."

"What! the Vicomte de Bragelonne? are you smitten too? By Heaven, they will all grow mad over him one after the other; but he, on the contrary, has a reason for being melancholy."

"Why so?"

"Oh, indeed! you wish me to betray state secrets, do you?"

"If I wish it, you must do so, for you told me you were quite ready to do

everything I wished."

"Well, then, he is bored in his own country. Does that satisfy you?"

"Bored?"

"Yes, a proof that he is a simpleton; I allow him to fall in love with Miss Mary Grafton, and he feels bored. Can you believe it?"

"Very good; it seems, then, that if you were to find Miss Lucy Stewart indifferent to you, you would console yourself by falling in love with Miss Mary Grafton."

"I don't say that; in the first place, you know that Mary Grafton does not care for me; besides, a man can only console himself for a lost affection by the discovery of a new one. Again, however, I repeat, the question is not of myself, but of that young man. One might almost be tempted to call the girl he has left behind him a Helen - a Helen before the little ceremony she went through with Paris, of course."

"He has left some one, then?"

"That is to say, some one has left him."

"Poor fellow! so much the worse!"

"Why do you mean by 'so much the worse'?"

"Why not? why did he leave?"

"Do you think it was of his own wish or will that he left?"

"Was he obliged to leave, then?"

"He left Paris under orders, my dear Stewart; and prepare to be surprised
- by express orders of the king."

"Ah! I begin to see, now."

"At least say nothing at all about it."

"You know very well that I am just as discreet as anybody else. And so
the king sent him away?"

"Yes."

"And during his absence he takes his sweetheart from him?"

"Yes; and, will you believe it? the silly fellow, instead of thanking the
king, is making himself miserable."

"What! thank the king for depriving him of the woman he loves! Really,

sire, yours is a most ungentlemanly speech."

"But, pray understand me. If she whom the king had run off with was either a Miss Grafton or a Miss Stewart, I should not be of his opinion; nay, I should even think him not half wretched enough; but she is a little, thin, lame thing. Deuce take such fidelity as that! Surely, one can hardly understand how a man can refuse a girl who is rich for one who is poverty itself - a girl who loves him for one who deceives and betrays him."

"Do you think that Mary seriously wishes to please the vicomte, sire?"

"I do, indeed."

"Very good! the vicomte will settle down in England, for Mary has a clear head, and when she fixes her mind upon anything, she does so thoroughly."

"Take care, my dear Miss Stewart; if the vicomte has any idea of adopting our country, he has not long to do so, for it was only the day before yesterday that he again asked me for permission to leave."

"Which you refused him, I suppose?"

"I should think so, indeed; my royal brother is far too anxious for his absence; and, for myself, my _amour propre_ is enlisted on his side, for I will never have it said that I had held out as a bait to this young man

the noblest and gentlest creature in England - "

"You are very gallant, sire," said Miss Stewart, with a pretty pout.

"I do not allude to Miss Stewart, for she is worthy of a king's devotion; and since she has captivated me I trust that no one else will be caught by her; I say, therefore, finally, that the attention I have shown this young man will not have been thrown away; he will stay with us here, he will marry here, or I am very much mistaken."

"And I hope that when he is once married and settled, instead of being angry with your majesty, he will be grateful to you, for every one tries his utmost to please him; even the Duke of Buckingham, whose brilliancy, which is incredible, seems to pale before that of this young Frenchman."

"Including Miss Stewart even, who calls him the most finished gentleman she ever saw."

"Stay, sire; you have spoken quite enough, and quite highly enough, of Miss Grafton, to overlook what I may have said about De Bragelonne. But, by the by, sire, your kindness for some time past astonishes me: you think of those who are absent, you forgive those who have done you a wrong, in fact, you are as nearly as possible, perfect. How does it happen - "

"It is because you allow yourself to be loved," he said, beginning to

laugh.

"Oh! there must be some other reason."

"Well, I am doing all I can to oblige my brother, Louis XIV."

"Nay, I must have another reason."

"Well, then, the true motive is that Buckingham strongly recommended the young man to me, saying: 'Sire, I begin by yielding up all claim to Miss Grafton; I pray you follow my example.'"

"The duke is, indeed, a true gentleman."

"Oh! of course, of course; it is Buckingham's turn now, I suppose, to turn your head. You seem determined to cross me in everything to-day."

At this moment some one rapped at the door.

"Who is it who presumes to interrupt us?" exclaimed Charles, impatiently.

"Really, sire, you are extremely vain with your 'who is it who presumes?' and in order to punish you for it - "

She went to the door and opened it.

"It is a courier from France," said Miss Stewart.

"A courier from France!" exclaimed Charles; "from my sister, perhaps?"

"Yes, sire," said the usher, "a special messenger."

"Let him come in at once," said Charles.

"You have a letter for me," said the king to the courier as he entered,
"from the Duchess of Orleans?"

"Yes, sire," replied the courier, "and so urgent in its nature that I
have only been twenty-six hours in bringing it to your majesty, and yet I
lost three-quarters of an hour at Calais."

"Your zeal shall not be forgotten," said the king, as he opened the
letter. When he had read it he burst out laughing, and exclaimed, "Upon
my word, I am at a loss to understand anything about it." He then read
the letter a second time, Miss Stewart assuming a manner marked by the
greatest reserve, and doing her utmost to restrain her ardent curiosity.

"Francis," said the king to his valet, "see that this excellent fellow is
well taken care of and sleeps soundly, and that on waking to-morrow he
finds a purse of fifty sovereigns by his bedside."

"Sire!" said the courier, amazed.

"Begone, begone; my sister was perfectly right in desiring you to use the utmost diligence; the affair was most pressing." And he again began to laugh louder than ever. The courier, the valet, and Miss Stewart hardly knew what sort of countenance to assume. "Ah!" said the king, throwing himself back in his armchair: "When I think that you have knocked up – how many horses?"

"Two!"

"Two horses to bring this intelligence to me. That will do, you can leave us now."

The courier retired with the valet. Charles went to the window, which he opened, and leaning forward, called out - "Duke! Buckingham! come here, there's a good fellow."

The duke hurried to him, in obedience to the summons; but when he reached

the door, and perceived Miss Stewart, he hesitated to enter.

"Come in, and shut the door," said the king. The duke obeyed; and, perceiving in what an excellent humor the king was, he advanced, smiling, towards him. "Well, my dear duke, how do you get on with your Frenchman?"

"Sire, I am in the most perfect state of utter despair about him."

"Why so?"

"Because charming Miss Grafton is willing to marry him, but he is unwilling."

"Why, he is a perfect Boeotian!" cried Miss Stewart. "Let him say either 'Yes,' or 'No,' and let the affair end."

"But," said Buckingham, seriously, "you know, or you ought to know, madame, that M. de Bragelonne is in love in another direction."

"In that case," said the king, coming to Miss Stewart's help, "nothing is easier; let him say 'No,' then."

"Very true; and I have proved to him he was wrong not to say 'Yes.'"

"You told him candidly, I suppose, that La Valliere was deceiving him?"

"Yes, without the slightest reserve; and, as soon as I had done so, he gave a start, as if he were going to clear the Channel at a bound."

"At all events," said Miss Stewart, "he has done something; and a very good thing too, upon my word."

"But," said Buckingham, "I stopped him; I have left him and Miss Mary in

conversation together, and I sincerely trust that now he will not leave, as he seemed to have an idea of doing."

"An idea of leaving England?" cried the king.

"I, at one moment, hardly thought that any human power could have prevented him; but Miss Mary's eyes are now bent fully on him, and he will remain."

"Well, that is the very thing which deceives you, Buckingham," said the king, with a peal of laughter; "the poor fellow is predestined."

"Predestined to what?"

"If it were to be simply deceived, that is nothing; but, to look at him, it is a great deal."

"At a distance, and with Miss Grafton's aid, the blow will be warded off."

"Far from it, far from it; neither distance nor Miss Grafton's help will be of the slightest avail. Bragelonne will set off for Paris within an hour's time."

Buckingham started, and Miss Stewart opened her eyes very wide in astonishment.

"But, sire," said the duke, "your majesty knows that it is impossible."

"That is to say, my dear Buckingham, that it is impossible until it happens."

"Do not forget, sire, that the young man is a perfect lion, and that his wrath is terrible."

"I don't deny it, my dear duke."

"And that if he sees that his misfortune is certain, so much the worse for the author of it."

"I don't deny it; but what the deuce am I to do?"

"Were it the king himself," cried Buckingham, "I would not answer for him."

"Oh, the king has his musketeers to take care of him," said Charles, quietly; "I know that perfectly well, for I was kept dancing attendance in his ante-chamber at Blois. He has M. d'Artagnan, and what better guardian could the king have than M. d'Artagnan? I should make myself perfectly easy with twenty storms of passion, such as Bragelonne might display, if I had four guardians like D'Artagnan."

"But I entreat your majesty, who is so good and kind, to reflect a

little."

"Stay," said Charles II., presenting the letter to the duke, "read, and answer yourself what you would do in my place."

Buckingham slowly took hold of Madame's letter, and trembling with emotion, read the following words:

"For your own sake, for mine, for the honor and safety of every one, send M. de Bragelonne back to France immediately. Your devoted sister,
HENRIETTA."

"Well, Villiers, what do you say?"

"Really, sire, I have nothing to say," replied the duke, stupefied.

"Nay, would you, of all persons," said the king, artfully, "advise me not to listen to my sister when she writes so urgently?"

"Oh, no, no, sire; and yet - "

"You have not read the postscript, Villiers; it is under the fold of the letter, and escaped me at first; read it." And as the duke turned down a fold of the letter, he read:

"A thousand kind remembrances to those who love me."

The duke's head sank gradually on his breast; the paper trembled in his fingers, as if it had been changed to lead. The king paused for a moment, and, seeing that Buckingham did not speak, "He must follow his destiny, as we ours," continued the king; "every man has his own share of grief in this world; I have had my own, - I have had that of others who belong to me, - and have thus had a double weight of woe to endure! - But the deuce take all my cares now! Go, and bring our friend here, Villiers."

The duke opened the trellised door of the summer-house, and pointing at Raoul and Mary, who were walking together side by side, said, "What a cruel blow, sire, for poor Miss Grafton!"

"Nonsense; call him," said Charles II., knitting his black brows together; "every one seems to be sentimental here. There, look at Miss Stewart, who is wiping her eyes, - now deuce take the French fellow!"

The duke called to Raoul, and taking Miss Grafton by the hand, he led her towards the king.

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," said Charles II., "did you not ask me the day before yesterday for permission to return to Paris?"

"Yes, sire," replied Raoul, greatly puzzled by this address.

"And I refused you, I think?"

"Yes, sire."

"For which you were angry with me?"

"No, sire; your majesty had no doubt excellent reasons for withholding it; for you are so wise and so good that everything you do is well done."

"I alleged, I believe, as a reason, that the king of France had not recalled you?"

"Yes, sire, that was the reason you assigned."

"Well, M. de Bragelonne, I have reflected over the matter since; if the king did not, in fact, fix your return, he begged me to render your sojourn in England as agreeable as possible; since, however, you ask my permission to return, it is because your longer residence in England is no longer agreeable to you."

"I do not say that, sire."

"No, but your request, at least," said the king, "signified that another place of residence would be more agreeable to you than this."

At this moment Raoul turned towards the door, against which Miss Grafton

was leaning, pale and sorrow-stricken; her other hand was passed through the duke's arm.

"You do not reply," pursued Charles; "the proverb is plain enough, that 'silence gives consent.' Very good, Monsieur de Bragelonne; I am now in a position to satisfy you; whenever you please, therefore, you can leave for Paris, for which you have my authority."

"Sire!" exclaimed Raoul, while Mary stifled an exclamation of grief which rose to her lips, unconsciously pressing Buckingham's arm.

"You can be at Dover this evening," continued the king, "the tide serves at two o'clock in the morning."

Raoul, astounded, stammered out a few broken sentences, which equally answered the purpose both of thanks and of excuse.

"I therefore bid you adieu, Monsieur de Bragelonne, and wish you every sort of prosperity," said the king, rising; "you will confer a pleasure on me by keeping this diamond in remembrance of me; I had intended it as a marriage gift."

Miss Grafton felt her limbs almost giving way; and, as Raoul received the ring from the king's hand, he, too, felt his strength and courage failing him. He addressed a few respectful words to the king, a passing compliment to Miss Stewart, and looked for Buckingham to bid him adieu.

The king profited by this moment to disappear. Raoul found the duke engaged in endeavoring to encourage Miss Grafton.

"Tell him to remain, I implore you!" said Buckingham to Mary.

"No, I will tell him to go," replied Miss Grafton, with returning animation; "I am not one of those women who have more pride than heart; if she whom he loves is in France, let him return thither and bless me for having advised him to go and seek his happiness there. If, on the contrary, she shall have ceased to love him, let him come back here again; I shall still love him, and his unhappiness will not have lessened him in my regard. In the arms of my house you will find that which Heaven has engraven on my heart - *_Habenti parum, egenti cuncta_*. 'To the rich is accorded little, to the poor everything.'"

"I do not believe, Bragelonne, that you will find yonder the equivalent of what you leave behind you here."

"I think, or at least hope," said Raoul, with a gloomy air, "that she whom I love is worthy of my affection; but if it be true she is unworthy of me, as you have endeavored to make me believe, I will tear her image from my heart, duke, even if my heart breaks in the attempt."

Mary Grafton gazed upon him with an expression of the most indefinable pity, and Raoul returned her look with a sweet, sorrowful smile, saying, "Mademoiselle, the diamond which the king has given me was destined for

you, - give me leave to offer it for your acceptance: if I marry in France, you will send it me back; if I do not marry, keep it." And he bowed and left her.

"What does he mean?" thought Buckingham, while Raoul pressed Mary's icy hand with marks of the most reverential respect.

Mary understood the look that Buckingham fixed upon her.

"If it were a wedding-ring, I would not accept it," she said.

"And yet you were willing to ask him to return to you."

"Oh! duke," cried the young girl in heart-broken accents, "a woman such as I am is never accepted as a consolation by a man like him."

"You do not think he will return, then?"

"Never," said Miss Grafton, in a choking voice.

"And I grieve to tell you, Mary, that he will find yonder his happiness destroyed, his mistress lost to him. His honor even has not escaped. What will be left him, then, Mary, equal to your affection? Answer, Mary, you who know yourself so well."

Miss Grafton placed her white hand on Buckingham's arm, and, while Raoul

was hurrying away with headlong speed, she repeated in dying accents the line from Romeo and Juliet:

"_I must be gone and live, or stay and die_."

As she finished the last word, Raoul disappeared. Miss Grafton returned to her own apartments, paler than death. Buckingham availed himself of the arrival of the courier, who had brought the letter to the king, to write to Madame and to the Comte de Guiche. The king had not been mistaken, for at two in the morning the tide was at full flood, and Raoul had embarked for France.