

Chapter 2

A Lover and His Mistress.

Whilst the wax-lights were burning in the castle of Blois, around the inanimate body of Gaston of Orleans, that last representative of the past; whilst the _bourgeois_ of the city were thinking out his epitaph, which was far from being a panegyric; whilst madame the dowager, no longer remembering that in her young days she had loved that senseless corpse to such a degree as to fly the paternal palace for his sake, was making, within twenty paces of the funeral apartment, her little calculations of interest and her little sacrifices of pride; other interests and other prides were in agitation in all the parts of the castle into which a living soul could penetrate. Neither the lugubrious sounds of the bells, nor the voices of the chanters, nor the splendor of the wax-lights through the windows, nor the preparations for the funeral, had power to divert the attention of two persons, placed at a window of the interior court - a window that we are acquainted with, and which lighted a chamber forming part of what were called the little apartments. For the rest, a joyous beam of the sun, for the sun appeared to care little for the loss France had just suffered; a sunbeam, we say, descended upon them, drawing perfumes from the neighboring flowers, and animating the walls themselves. These two persons, so occupied, not by the death of the duke, but by the conversation which was the consequence of that death, were a young woman and a young man. The latter personage, a man of from twenty-five to twenty-six years of age, with a mien

sometimes lively and sometimes dull, making good use of two large eyes, shaded with long eye-lashes, was short of stature and swart of skin; he smiled with an enormous, but well-furnished mouth, and his pointed chin, which appeared to enjoy a mobility nature does not ordinarily grant to that portion of the countenance, leant from time to time very lovingly towards his interlocutrix, who, we must say, did not always draw back so rapidly as strict propriety had a right to require. The young girl - we know her, for we have already seen her, at that very same window, by the light of that same sun - the young girl presented a singular mixture of shyness and reflection; she was charming when she laughed, beautiful when she became serious; but, let us hasten to say, she was more frequently charming than beautiful. These two appeared to have attained the culminating point of a discussion - half-bantering, half-serious.

"Now, Monsieur Malicorne," said the young girl, "does it, at length, please you that we should talk reasonably?"

"You believe that that is very easy, Mademoiselle Aure," replied the young man. "To do what we like, when we can only do what we are able - "

"Good! there he is bewildered in his phrases."

"Who, I?"

"Yes, you; quit that lawyer's logic, my dear."

"Another impossibility. Clerk I am, Mademoiselle de Montalais."

"Demoiselle I am, Monsieur Malicorne."

"Alas, I know it well, and you overwhelm me by your rank; so I will say no more to you."

"Well, no, I don't overwhelm you; say what you have to tell me - say it, I insist upon it."

"Well, I obey you."

"That is truly fortunate."

"Monsieur is dead."

"Ah, _peste!_ that's news! And where do you come from, to be able to tell us that?"

"I come from Orleans, mademoiselle."

"And is that all the news you bring?"

"Ah, no; I am come to tell you that Madame Henrietta of England is coming to marry the king's brother."

"Indeed, Malicorne, you are insupportable with your news of the last century. Now, mind, if you persist in this bad habit of laughing at people, I will have you turned out."

"Oh!"

"Yes, for really you exasperate me."

"There, there. Patience, mademoiselle."

"You want to make yourself of consequence; I know well enough why. Go!"

"Tell me, and I will answer you frankly, yes, if the thing be true."

"You know that I am anxious to have that commission of lady of honor, which I have been foolish enough to ask of you, and you do not use your credit."

"Who, I?" Malicorne cast down his eyes, joined his hands, and assumed his sullen air. "And what credit can the poor clerk of a procurer have, pray?"

"Your father has not twenty thousand livres a year for nothing, M. Malicorne."

"A provincial fortune, Mademoiselle de Montalais."

"Your father is not in the secrets of monsieur le prince for nothing."

"An advantage which is confined to lending monseigneur money."

"In a word, you are not the most cunning young fellow in the province for nothing."

"You flatter me!"

"Who, I?"

"Yes, you."

"How so?"

"Since I maintain that I have no credit, and you maintain I have."

"Well, then, - my commission?"

"Well, - your commission?"

"Shall I have it, or shall I not?"

"You shall have it."

"Ay, but when?"

"When you like."

"Where is it, then?"

"In my pocket."

"How - in your pocket?"

"Yes."

And, with a smile, Malicorne drew from his pocket a letter, upon which mademoiselle seized as a prey, and which she read eagerly. As she read, her face brightened.

"Malicorne," cried she after having read it, "In truth, you are a good lad."

"What for, mademoiselle?"

"Because you might have been paid for this commission, and you have not." And she burst into a loud laugh, thinking to put the clerk out of countenance; but Malicorne sustained the attack bravely.

"I do not understand you," said he. It was now Montalais who was

disconcerted in her turn. "I have declared my sentiments to you," continued Malicorne. "You have told me three times, laughing all the while, that you did not love me; you have embraced me once without laughing, and that is all I want."

"All?" said the proud and coquettish Montalais, in a tone through which the wounded pride was visible.

"Absolutely all, mademoiselle," replied Malicorne.

"Ah!" - And this monosyllable indicated as much anger as the young man might have expected gratitude. He shook his head quietly.

"Listen, Montalais," said he, without heeding whether that familiarity pleased his mistress or not; "let us not dispute about it."

"And why not?"

"Because during the year which I have known you, you might have had me turned out of doors twenty times if I did not please you."

"Indeed; and on what account should I have had you turned out?"

"Because I have been sufficiently impertinent for that."

"Oh, that, - yes, that's true."

"You see plainly that you are forced to avow it," said Malicorne.

"Monsieur Malicorne!"

"Don't let us be angry; if you have retained me, then it has not been without cause."

"It is not, at least, because I love you," cried Montalais.

"Granted. I will even say, at this moment, I am certain that you hate me."

"Oh, you have never spoken so truly."

"Well, on my part, I detest you."

"Ah! I take the act."

"Take it. You find me brutal and foolish; on my part I find you have a harsh voice, and your face is too often distorted with anger. At this moment you would allow yourself to be thrown out of that window rather than allow me to kiss the tip of your finger; I would precipitate myself from the top of the balcony rather than touch the hem of your robe. But, in five minutes, you will love me, and I shall adore you. Oh, it is just so."

"I doubt it."

"And I swear it."

"Coxcomb!"

"And then, that is not the true reason. You stand in need of me, Aure, and I of you. When it pleases you to be gay, I make you laugh; when it suits me to be loving, I look at you. I have given you a commission of lady of honor which you wished for; you will give me, presently, something I wish for."

"I will?"

"Yes, you will; but, at this moment, my dear Aure, I declare to you that I wish for absolutely nothing, so be at ease."

"You are a frightful man, Malicorne; I was going to rejoice at getting this commission, and thus you quench my joy."

"Good; there is no time lost, - you will rejoice when I am gone."

"Go, then; and after - "

"So be it; but in the first place, a piece of advice."

"What is it?"

"Resume your good-humor, - you are ugly when you pout."

"Coarse!"

"Come, let us tell the truth to each other, while we are about it."

"Oh, Malicorne! Bad-hearted man!"

"Oh, Montalais! Ungrateful girl!"

The young man leant with his elbow upon the window-frame; Montalais took a book and opened it. Malicorne stood up, brushed his hat with his sleeve, smoothed down his black doublet; - Montalais, though pretending to read, looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

"Good!" cried she, furious; "he has assumed his respectful air - and he will pout for a week."

"A fortnight, mademoiselle," said Malicorne, bowing.

Montalais lifted up her little doubled fist. "Monster!" said she; "oh! that I were a man!"

"What would you do to me?"

"I would strangle you."

"Ah! very well, then," said Malicorne; "I believe I begin to desire something."

"And what do you desire, Monsieur Demon? That I should lose my soul from anger?"

Malicorne was rolling his hat respectfully between his fingers; but, all at once, he let fall his hat, seized the young girl by the shoulders, pulled her towards him, and sealed her mouth with two lips that were very warm, for a man pretending to so much indifference. Aure would have cried out, but the cry was stifled in his kiss. Nervous and, apparently, angry, the young girl pushed Malicorne against the wall.

"Good!" said Malicorne, philosophically, "that's enough for six weeks. Adieu, mademoiselle, accept my very humble salutation." And he made three steps towards the door.

"Well! no, - you shall not go!" cried Montalais, stamping with her little foot. "Stay where you are! I order you!"

"You order me?"

"Yes; am I not mistress?"

"Of my heart and soul, without doubt."

"A pretty property! *_ma foi!* The soul is silly and the heart dry."

"Beware, Montalais, I know you," said Malicorne; "you are going to fall in love with your humble servant."

"Well, yes!" said she, hanging round his neck with childish indolence, rather than with loving abandonment. "Well, yes! for I must thank you at least."

"And for what?"

"For the commission; is it not my whole future?"

"And mine."

Montalais looked at him.

"It is frightful," said she, "that one can never guess whether you are speaking seriously or not."

"I cannot speak more seriously. I was going to Paris, - you are going there, - we are going there."

"And so it was for that motive only you have served me; selfish fellow!"

"What would you have me say, Aure? I cannot live without you."

"Well! in truth, it is just so with me; you are, nevertheless, it must be confessed, a very bad-hearted young man."

"Aure, my dear Aure, take care! if you take to calling me names again, you know the effect they produce upon me, and I shall adore you." And so saying, Malicorne drew the young girl a second time towards him. But at that instant a step resounded on the staircase. The young people were so close, that they would have been surprised in the arms of each other, if Montalais had not violently pushed Malicorne, with his back against the door, just then opening. A loud cry, followed by angry reproaches, immediately resounded. It was Madame de Saint-Remy who uttered the cry and the angry words. The unlucky Malicorne almost crushed her between the wall and the door she was coming in at.

"It is again that good-for-nothing!" cried the old lady. "Always here!"

"Ah, madame!" replied Malicorne, in a respectful tone; "it is eight long days since I was here."