

Chapter 36

The Bath.

At Vulaines, beneath the impenetrable shade of flowering osiers and willows, which, as they bent down their green heads, dipped the extremities of their branches in the blue waters, a long and flat-bottomed boat, with ladders covered with long blue curtains, served as a refuge for the bathing Dianas, who, as they left the water, were watched by twenty plumed Acteons, who, eagerly, and full of admiration, galloped up and down the flowery banks of the river. But Diana herself, even the chaste Diana, clothed in her long chlamys, was less beautiful - less impenetrable, than Madame, as young and beautiful as that goddess herself. For, notwithstanding the fine tunic of the huntress, her round and delicate knee can be seen; and notwithstanding the sonorous quiver, her brown shoulders can be detected; whereas, in Madame's case, a long white veil enveloped her, wrapping her round and round a hundred times, as she resigned herself into the hands of her female attendants, and thus was rendered inaccessible to the most indiscreet, as well as to the most penetrating gaze. When she ascended the ladder, the poets were present - and all were poets when Madame was the subject of discussion - the twenty poets who were galloping about, stopped, and with one voice, exclaimed that pearls, and not drops of water, were falling from her person, to be lost again in the happy river. The king, the center of these effusions, and of this respectful homage, imposed silence upon those expatiators, for whom it seemed impossible to exhaust their raptures, and he rode away, for fear of offending, even through the silken curtains, the

modesty of the woman and the dignity of the princess. A great blank thereupon ensued in the scene, and perfect silence in the boat. From the movements on board - from the flutterings and agitations of the curtains - the goings to and fro of the female attendants engaged in their duties, could be guessed.

The king smilingly listened to the conversation of the courtiers around him, but it could easily be perceived that he gave but little, if any, attention to their remarks. In fact, hardly had the sound of the rings drawn along the curtain-rods announced that Madame was dressed, and that the goddess was about to make her reappearance, than the king, returning to his former post immediately, and running quite close to the river-bank, gave the signal for all those to approach whose duty or pleasure summoned them to Madame's side. The pages hurried forward, conducting the led horses; the carriages, which had remained sheltered under the trees, advanced towards the tent, followed by a crowd of servants, bearers, and female attendants, who, while their masters had been bathing, had mutually exchanged their own observations, critical remarks, and the discussion of matters personal - the fugitive journal of that period, of which no one now remembers anything, not even by the waves, the witnesses of what went on that day - themselves now sublimed into immensity, as the actors have vanished into eternity.

A crowd of people swarming upon the banks of the river, without reckoning the groups of peasants drawn together by their anxiety to see the king

and the princess, was, for many minutes, the most disorderly, but the most agreeable, mob imaginable. The king dismounted from his horse, a movement which was imitated by all the courtiers, and offered his hat to Madame, whose rich riding-habit displayed her fine figure, which was set off to great advantage by that garment, made of fine woolen cloth embroidered with silver. Her hair, still damp and blacker than jet, hung in heavy masses upon her white and delicate neck. Joy and health sparkled in her beautiful eyes; composed, yet full of energy, she inhaled the air in deep draughts, under a lace parasol, which was borne by one of her pages. Nothing could be more charming, more graceful, more poetical, than these two figures buried under the rose-colored shade of the parasol, the king, whose white teeth were displayed in continual smiles, and Madame, whose black eyes sparkled like carbuncles in the glittering reflection of the changing hues of the silk. When Madame approached her horse, a magnificent animal of Andalusian breed, of spotless white, somewhat heavy, perhaps, but with a spirited and splendid head, in which the mixture, happily combined, of Arabian and Spanish blood could be readily traced, and whose long tail swept the ground; and as the princess affected difficulty in mounting, the king took her in his arms in such a manner that Madame's arm was clasped like a circlet of alabaster around the king's neck. Louis, as he withdrew, involuntarily touched with his lips the arm, which was not withheld, and the princess having thanked her royal equerry, every one sprang to his saddle at the same moment. The king and Madame drew aside to allow the carriages, the outriders, and runners, to pass by. A fair proportion of the cavaliers, released from the restraint etiquette had imposed upon them, gave the rein to their

horses, and darted after the carriages which bore the maids of honor, as blooming as so many virgin huntresses around Diana, and the human whirlwind, laughing, chattering, and noisy, passed onward.

The king and Madame, however, kept their horses in hand at a foot-pace. Behind his majesty and his sister-in-law, certain of the courtiers – those, at least, who were seriously disposed or were anxious to be within reach, or under the eyes, of the king - followed at a respectful distance, restraining their impatient horses, regulating their pace by that of the king and Madame, and abandoned themselves to all the delight and gratification which is to be found in the conversation of clever people, who can, with perfect courtesy, make a thousand atrocious, but laughable remarks about their neighbors. In their stifled laughter, and in the little reticences of their sardonic humor, Monsieur, the poor absentee, was not spared. But they pitied, and bewailed greatly, the fate of De Guiche, and it must be confessed that their compassion, as far as he was concerned, was not misplaced. The king and Madame having breathed the horses, and repeated a hundred times over such remarks as the courtiers, who supplied them with talk, suggested to them, set off at a hand gallop, and the leafy coverts of the forest resounded to the footfalls of the mounted party. To the conversations beneath the shade of the trees, - to remarks made in the shape of confidential communications, and observations, mysteriously exchanged, succeeded the noisiest bursts of laughter; - from the very outriders to royalty itself, merriment seemed to spread. Every one began to laugh and to cry out. The magpies and the jays fluttered away uttering their guttural cries,

beneath the waving avenues of oaks; the cuckoo staid his monotonous cry in the recesses of the forest; the chaffinch and tomtit flew away in clouds; while the terrified deer bounded riverwards from the midst of the thickets. This crowd, spreading joy, confusion, and light wherever it passed, was heralded, it may be said, to the chateau by its own clamor. As the king and Madame entered the village, they were received by the acclamations of the crowd. Madame hastened to look for Monsieur, for she instinctively understood that he had been far too long kept from sharing in this joy. The king went to rejoin the queens; he knew he owed them - one especially - a compensation for his long absence. But Madame was not admitted to Monsieur's apartments, and she was informed that Monsieur was asleep. The king, instead of being met by Maria Theresa smiling, as was usual with her, found Anne of Austria in the gallery watching for his return, who advanced to meet him, and taking him by the hand, led him to her own apartment. No one ever knew what was the nature of the conversation which took place between them, or rather what it was that the queen-mother said to Louis XIV.; but the general tenor of the interview might certainly be guessed from the annoyed expression of the king's face as he left her.

But we, whose mission it is to interpret all things, as it is also to communicate our interpretations to our readers, - we should fail in our duty, if we were to leave them in ignorance of the result of this interview. It will be found sufficiently detailed, at least we hope so, in the following chapter.