

Chapter 40

The Nymphs of the Park of Fontainebleau.

The king remained for a moment to enjoy a triumph as complete as it could possibly be. He then turned towards Madame, for the purpose of admiring her also a little in her turn. Young persons love with more vivacity, perhaps with greater ardor and deeper passion, than others more advanced in years; but all the other feelings are at the same time developed in proportion to their youth and vigor: so that vanity being with them almost always the equivalent of love, the latter feeling, according to the laws of equipoise, never attains that degree of perfection which it acquires in men and women from thirty to five and thirty years of age. Louis thought of Madame, but only after he had studiously thought of himself; and Madame carefully thought of herself, without bestowing a single thought upon the king. The victim, however, of all these royal affections and affectations, was poor De Guiche. Every one could observe his agitation and prostration - a prostration which was, indeed, the more remarkable since people were not accustomed to see him with his arms hanging listlessly by his side, his head bewildered, and his eyes with all their bright intelligence bedimmed. It rarely happened that any uneasiness was excited on his account, whenever a question of elegance or taste was under discussion; and De Guiche's defeat was accordingly attributed by the greater number present to his courtier-like tact and ability. But there were others - keen-sighted observers are always to be met with at court - who remarked his paleness and his altered looks; which he could neither feign nor conceal, and their conclusion was that

De Guiche was not acting the part of a flatterer. All these sufferings, successes, and remarks were blended, confounded, and lost in the uproar of applause. When, however, the queens expressed their satisfaction and the spectators their enthusiasm, when the king had retired to his dressing-room to change his costume, and whilst Monsieur, dressed as a woman, as he delighted to be, was in his turn dancing about, De Guiche, who had now recovered himself, approached Madame, who, seated at the back

of the theater, was waiting for the second part, and had quitted the others for the purpose of creating a sort of solitude for herself in the midst of the crowd, to meditate, as it were, beforehand, upon chorographic effects; and it will be perfectly understood that, absorbed in deep meditation, she did not see, or rather pretended not to notice, anything that was passing around her. De Guiche, observing that she was alone, near a thicket constructed of painted cloth, approached her. Two of her maids of honor, dressed as hamadryads, seeing De Guiche advance, drew back out of respect., whereupon De Guiche proceeded towards the middle of the circle and saluted her royal highness; but, whether she did or did not observe his salutations, the princess did not even turn her head. A cold shiver passed through poor De Guiche; he was unprepared for such utter indifference, for he had neither seen nor been told of anything that had taken place, and consequently could guess nothing. Remarking, therefore, that his obeisance obtained him no acknowledgement, he advanced one step further, and in a voice which he tried, though vainly, to render calm, said: "I have the honor to present my most humble respects to your royal highness."

Upon this Madame deigned to turn her eyes languishingly towards the comte, observing. "Ah! M. de Guiche, is that you? good day!"

The comte's patience almost forsook him, as he continued, - "Your royal highness danced just now most charmingly."

"Do you think so?" she replied with indifference.

"Yes; the character which your royal highness assumed is in perfect harmony with your own."

Madame again turned round, and, looking De Guiche full in the face with a bright and steady gaze, said, - "Why so?"

"Oh! there can be no doubt of it."

"Explain yourself?"

"You represented a divinity, beautiful, disdainful, inconstant."

"You mean Pomona, comte?"

"I allude to the goddess."

Madame remained silent for a moment, with her lips compressed, and then

observed, - "But, comte, you, too, are an excellent dancer."

"Nay, Madame, I am only one of those who are never noticed, or who are soon forgotten if they ever happen to be noticed."

With this remark, accompanied by one of those deep sighs which affect the remotest fibers of one's being, his heart burdened with sorrow and throbbing fast, his head on fire, and his gaze wandering, he bowed breathlessly, and withdrew behind the thicket. The only reply Madame condescended to make was by slightly raising her shoulders, and, as her ladies of honor had discreetly retired while the conversation lasted, she recalled them by a look. The ladies were Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Mademoiselle de Montalais.

"Did you hear what the Comte de Guiche said?" the princess inquired.

"No."

"It really is very singular," she continued, in a compassionate tone, "how exile has affected poor M. de Guiche's wit." And then, in a louder voice, fearful lest her unhappy victim might lose a syllable, she said, - "In the first place he danced badly, and afterwards his remarks were very silly."

She then rose, humming the air to which she was presently going to dance. De Guiche had overheard everything. The arrow pierced his heart

and wounded him mortally. Then, at the risk of interrupting the progress of the *_fete_* by his annoyance, he fled from the scene, tearing his beautiful costume of Autumn in pieces, and scattering, as he went along, the branches of vines, mulberry and almond trees, with all the other artificial attributes of his assumed divinity. A quarter of an hour afterwards he returned to the theater; but it will be readily believed that it was only a powerful effort of reason over his great excitement that enabled him to go back; or perhaps, for love is thus strangely constituted, he found it impossible even to remain much longer separated from the presence of one who had broken his heart. Madame was finishing her figure. She saw, but did not look at De Guiche, who, irritated and revengeful, turned his back upon her as she passed him, escorted by her nymphs, and followed by a hundred flatterers. During this time, at the other end of the theater, near the lake, a young woman was seated, with her eyes fixed upon one of the windows of the theater, from which were issuing streams of light - the window in question being that of the royal box. As De Guiche quitted the theater for the purpose of getting into the fresh air he so much needed, he passed close to this figure and saluted her. When she perceived the young man, she rose, like a woman surprised in the midst of ideas she was desirous of concealing from herself. De Guiche stopped as he recognized her, and said hurriedly, - "Good evening, Mademoiselle de la Valliere; I am indeed fortunate in meeting you."

"I, also, M. de Guiche, am glad of this accidental meeting," said the young girl, as she was about to withdraw.

"Pray do not leave me," said De Guiche, stretching out his hand towards her, "for you would be contradicting the kind words you have just pronounced. Remain, I implore you: the evening is most lovely. You wish to escape from the merry tumult, and prefer your own society. Well, I can understand it; all women who are possessed of any feeling do, and one never finds them dull or lonely when removed from the giddy vortex of these exciting amusements. Oh! Heaven!" he exclaimed, suddenly.

"What is the matter, monsieur le comte?" inquired La Valliere, with some anxiety. "You seem agitated."

"I! oh, no!"

"Will you allow me, M. de Guiche, to return you the thanks I had proposed to offer you on the very first opportunity? It is to your recommendation, I am aware, that I owe my admission among the number of Madame's maids of honor."

"Indeed! Ah! I remember now, and I congratulate myself. Do you love any one?"

"I!" exclaimed La Valliere.

"Forgive me, I hardly know what I am saying; a thousand times forgive me;

Madame was right, quite right, this brutal exile has completely turned my brain."

"And yet it seemed to me that the king received you with kindness."

"Do you think so? Received me with kindness - perhaps so - yes - "

"There cannot be a doubt he received you kindly, for, in fact, you returned without his permission."

"Quite true, and I believe you are right. But have you not seen M. de Bragelonne here?"

La Valliere started at the name. "Why do you ask?" she inquired.

"Have I offended you again?" said De Guiche. "In that case I am indeed unhappy, and greatly to be pitied."

"Yes, very unhappy, and very much to be pitied, Monsieur de Guiche, for you seem to be suffering terribly."

"Oh! mademoiselle, why have I not a devoted sister, or a true friend, such as yourself?"

"You have friends, Monsieur de Guiche, and the Vicomte de Bragelonne, of whom you spoke just now, is, I believe, one of the most devoted."

"Yes, yes, you are right, he is one of my best friends. Farewell, Mademoiselle de la Valliere, farewell." And he fled, like one possessed, along the banks of the lake. His dark shadow glided, lengthening as it disappeared, among the illumined yews and glittering undulations of the water. La Valliere looked after him, saying, - "Yes, yes, he, too, is suffering, and I begin to understand why."

She had hardly finished when her companions, Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, ran forward. They were released from their attendance, and had changed their costumes of nymphs; delighted with the beautiful night, and the success of the evening, they returned to look after their companion.

"What, already here!" they said to her. "We thought we should be first at the rendezvous."

"I have been here this quarter of an hour," replied La Valliere.

"Did not the dancing amuse you?"

"No."

"But surely the enchanting spectacle?"

"No more than the dancing. As far as beauty is concerned, I much prefer

that which these dark woods present, in whose depths can be seen, now in one direction and again in another, a light passing by, as though it were an eye, in color like a midnight rainbow, sometimes open, at others closed."

"La Valliere is quite a poetess," said Tonnay-Charente.

"In other words," said Montalais, "she is insupportable. Whenever there is a question of laughing a little or of amusing ourselves, La Valliere begins to cry; whenever we girls have reason to cry, because, perhaps, we have mislaid our dresses, or because our vanity has been wounded, or our costume fails to produce an effect, La Valliere laughs."

"As far as I am concerned, that is not my character," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. "I am a woman; and there are few like me; whoever loves me, flatters me; whoever flatters me, pleases me; and whoever pleases - "

"Well!" said Montalais, "you do not finish."

"It is too difficult," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, laughing loudly. "Do you, who are so clever, finish for me."

"And you, Louise?" said Montalais, "does any one please you?"

"That is a matter that concerns no one but myself," replied the young

girl, rising from the mossy bank on which she had been reclining during the whole time the ballet lasted. "Now, mesdemoiselles, we have agreed to amuse ourselves to-night without any one to overlook us, and without any escort. We are three in number, we like one another, and the night is lovely. Look yonder, do you not see the moon slowly rising, silvering the topmost branches of the chestnuts and the oaks. Oh, beautiful walk! sweet liberty! exquisite soft turf of the woods, the happiness which your friendship confers upon me! let us walk arm in arm towards those large trees. Out yonder all are at this moment seated at table and fully occupied, or preparing to adorn themselves for a set and formal promenade; horses are being saddled, or harnessed to the carriages - the queen's mules or Madame's four white ponies. As for ourselves, we shall soon reach some retired spot where no eyes can see us and no step follow ours. Do you not remember, Montalais, the woods of Cheverny and of Chambord, the innumerable rustling poplars of Blois, where we exchanged our mutual hopes?"

"And confidences too?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "I also think a good deal; but I take care - "

"To say nothing," said Montalais, "so that when Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente thinks, Athenais is the only one who knows it."

"Hush!" said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "I hear steps approaching from this side."

"Quick, quick, then, among the high reed-grass," said Montalais; "stoop, Athenais, you are so tall."

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente stooped as she was told, and, almost at the same moment, they saw two gentlemen approaching, their heads bent down, walking arm in arm, on the fine gravel walk running parallel with the bank. The young girls had, indeed, made themselves small - indeed invisible.

"It is Monsieur de Guiche," whispered Montalais in Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's ear.

"It is Monsieur de Bragelonne," whispered the latter to La Valliere.

The two young men approached still closer, conversing in animated tones.

"She was here just now," said the count. "If I had only seen her, I should have declared it to be a vision, but I spoke to her."

"You are positive, then?"

"Yes; but perhaps I frightened her."

"In what way?"

"Oh! I was still half crazy at you know what; so that she could hardly have understood what I was saying, and must have grown alarmed."

"Oh!" said Bragelonne, "do not make yourself uneasy: she is all kindness, and will excuse you; she is clear-sighted, and will understand."

"Yes, but if she should have understood, and understood too well, she may talk."

"You do not know Louise, count," said Raoul. "Louise possesses every virtue, and has not a single fault." And the two young men passed on, and, as they proceeded, their voices were soon lost in the distance.

"How is it, La Valliere," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "that the Vicomte de Bragelonne spoke of you as Louise?"

"We were brought up together," replied Louise, blushing; "M. de Bragelonne has honored me by asking my hand in marriage, but - "

"Well?"

"It seems the king will not consent to it."

"Eh! Why the king? and what has the king to do with it?" exclaimed Aure,

sharply. "Good gracious! has the king any right to interfere in matters of that kind? Politics are politics, as M. de Mazarin used to say; but love is love. If, therefore, you love M. de Bragelonne, marry him. I give my consent."

Athenais began to laugh.

"Oh! I am speaking seriously," replied Montalais, "and my opinion in this case is quite as good as the king's, I suppose; is it not, Louise?"

"Come," said La Valliere, "these gentlemen have passed; let us take advantage of our being alone to cross the open ground and so take refuge in the woods."

"So much the better," said Athenais, "because I see the torches setting out from the chateau and the theater, and they seem as if they were preceding some person of distinction."

"Let us run, then," said all three. And, gracefully lifting up the long skirts of their silk dresses, they lightly ran across the open space between the lake and the thickest covert of the park. Montalais agile as a deer, Athenais eager as a young wolf, bounded through the dry grass, and, now and then, some bold Acteon might, by the aid of the faint light, have perceived their straight and well-formed limbs somewhat displayed beneath the heavy folds of their satin petticoats. La Valliere, more refined and more bashful, allowed her dress to flow around her; retarded

also by the lameness of her foot, it was not long before she called out to her companions to halt, and, left behind, she obliged them both to wait for her. At this moment, a man, concealed in a dry ditch planted with young willow saplings, scrambled quickly up its shelving side, and ran off in the direction of the chateau. The three young girls, on their side, reached the outskirts of the park, every path of which they well knew. The ditches were bordered by high hedges full of flowers, which on that side protected the foot-passengers from being intruded upon by the horses and carriages. In fact, the sound of Madame's and the queen's carriages could be heard in the distance upon the hard dry ground of the roads, followed by the mounted cavaliers. Distant music reached them in response, and when the soft notes died away, the nightingale, with throat of pride, poured forth his melodious chants, and his most complicated, learned, and sweetest compositions to those who had met beneath the thick covert of the woods. Near the songster, in the dark background of the large trees, could be seen the glistening eyes of an owl, attracted by the harmony. In this way the *_fete_* of the whole court was a *_fete_* also for the mysterious inhabitants of the forest; for certainly the deer in the brake, the pheasant on the branch, the fox in its hole, were all listening. One could realize the life led by this nocturnal and invisible population from the restless movements that suddenly took place among the leaves. Our sylvan nymphs uttered a slight cry, but, reassured immediately afterwards, they laughed, and resumed their walk. In this manner they reached the royal oak, the venerable relic of a tree which in its prime has listened to the sighs of Henry II. for the beautiful Diana of Poitiers, and later still to those of Henry IV. for the lovely

Gabrielle d'Estrees. Beneath this oak the gardeners had piled up the moss and turf in such a manner that never had a seat more luxuriously rested the wearied limbs of man or monarch. The trunk, somewhat rough to recline against, was sufficiently large to accommodate the three young girls, whose voices were lost among the branches, which stretched upwards to the sky.