Chapter 56

Story of a Dryad and a Naiad.

Every one had partaken of the banquet at the chateau, and afterwards assumed their full court dresses. The usual hour for the repast was five o'clock. If we say, then, that the repast occupied an hour, and the toilette two hours, everybody was ready about eight o'clock in the evening. Towards eight o'clock, then, the guests began to arrive at Madame's, for we have already intimated that it was Madame who "received" that evening. And at Madame's _soirees_ no one failed to be present; for the evenings passed in her apartments always had that perfect charm about them which the queen, that pious and excellent princess, had not been able to confer upon her _reunions_. For, unfortunately, one of the advantages of goodness of disposition is that it is far less amusing than wit of an ill-natured character. And yet, let us hasten to add, that such a style of wit could not be assigned to Madame, for her disposition of mind, naturally of the very highest order, comprised too much true generosity, too many noble impulses and high-souled thoughts, to warrant her being termed ill-natured. But Madame was endowed with a spirit of resistance - a gift frequently fatal to its possessor, for it breaks where another disposition would have bent; the result was that blows did not become deadened upon her as upon what might be termed the cotton-wadded feelings of Maria Theresa. Her heart rebounded at each attack, and therefore, whenever she was attacked, even in a manner that almost stunned her, she returned blow for blow to any one imprudent enough to tilt against her.

Was this really maliciousness of disposition or simply waywardness of character? We regard those rich and powerful natures as like the tree of knowledge, producing good and evil at the same time; a double branch, always blooming and fruitful, of which those who wish to eat know how to detect the good fruit, and from which the worthless and frivolous die who have eaten of it - a circumstance which is by no means to be regarded as a great misfortune. Madame, therefore, who had a well-disguised plan in her mind of constituting herself the second, if not even the principal, queen of the court, rendered her receptions delightful to all, from the conversation, the opportunities of meeting, and the perfect liberty she allowed every one of making any remark he pleased, on the condition, however, that the remark was amusing or sensible. And it will hardly be believed, that, by that means, there was less talking among the society Madame assembled together than elsewhere. Madame hated people who talked

much, and took a remarkably cruel revenge upon them, for she allowed them

to talk. She disliked pretension, too, and never overlooked that defect, even in the king himself. It was more than a weakness of Monsieur, and the princess had undertaken the amazing task of curing him of it. As for the rest, poets, wits, beautiful women, all were received by her with the air of a mistress superior to her slaves. Sufficiently meditative in her liveliest humors to make even poets meditate; sufficiently pretty to dazzle by her attractions, even among the prettiest; sufficiently witty for the most distinguished persons who were present, to be listened to with pleasure - it will easily be believed that the _reunions_ held in

Madame's apartments must naturally have proved very attractive. All who were young flocked there, and when the king himself happens to be young, everybody at court is so too. And so, the older ladies of the court, the strong-minded women of the regency, or of the last reign, pouted and sulked at their ease; but others only laughed at the fits of sulkiness in which these venerable individuals indulged, who had carried the love of authority so far as even to take command of bodies of soldiers in the wars of the Fronde, in order, as Madame asserted, not to lose their influence over men altogether. As eight o'clock struck her royal highness entered the great drawing-room accompanied by her ladies in attendance, and found several gentlemen belonging to the court already there, having been waiting for some minutes. Among those who had arrived before the hour fixed for the reception she looked round for one who, she thought, ought to have been first in attendance, but he was not there. However, almost at the very moment she completed her investigation, Monsieur was announced. Monsieur looked splendid. All the precious stones and jewels of Cardinal Mazarin, which of course that minister could not do otherwise than leave; all the queen-mother's jewels as well as a few belonging to his wife - Monsieur wore them all, and he was as dazzling as the rising sun. Behind him followed De Guiche, with hesitating steps and an air of contrition admirably assumed; De Guiche wore a costume of French-gray velvet, embroidered with silver, and trimmed with blue ribbons: he wore also Mechlin lace as rare and beautiful in its own way as the jewels of Monsieur in theirs. The plume in his hat was red. Madame, too, wore several colors, and preferred red for embroidery, gray for dress, and blue for flowers. M. de Guiche,

dressed as we have described, looked so handsome that he excited every one's observation. An interesting pallor of complexion, a languid expression of the eyes, his white hands seen through the masses of lace that covered them, the melancholy expression of his mouth - it was only necessary, indeed, to see M. de Guiche to admit that few men at the court of France could hope to equal him. The consequence was that Monsieur, who was pretentious enough to fancy he could eclipse a star even, if a star had adorned itself in a similar manner to himself, was, on the contrary, completely eclipsed in all imaginations, which are silent judges certainly, but very positive and firm in their convictions. Madame looked at De Guiche lightly, but light as her look had been, it brought a delightful color to his face. In fact, Madame found De Guiche so handsome and so admirably dressed, that she almost ceased regretting the royal conquest she felt she was on the point of escaping her. Her heart, therefore, sent the blood to her face. Monsieur approached her. He had not noticed the princess's blush, or if he had seen it, he was far from attributing it to its true cause.

"Madame," he said, kissing his wife's hand, "there is some one present here, who has fallen into disgrace, an unhappy exile whom I venture to recommend to your kindness. Do not forget, I beg, that he is one of my best friends, and that a gentle reception of him will please me greatly."

"What exile? what disgraced person are you speaking of?" inquired Madame, looking all round, and not permitting her glance to rest more on the count than on the others.

This was the moment to present De Guiche, and the prince drew aside and let De Guiche pass him, who, with a tolerably well-assumed awkwardness of manner, approached Madame and made his reverence to her.

"What!" exclaimed Madame, as if she were greatly surprised, "is M. de Guiche the disgraced individual you speak of, the exile in question?"

"Yes, certainly," returned the duke.

"Indeed," said Madame, "he seems almost the only person here!"

"You are unjust, Madame," said the prince.

"I?"

"Certainly. Come, forgive the poor fellow."

"Forgive him what? What have I to forgive M. de Guiche?"

"Come, explain yourself, De Guiche. What do you wish to be forgiven?" inquired the prince.

"Alas! her royal highness knows very well what it is," replied the latter, in a hypocritical tone.

"Come, come, give him your hand, Madame," said Philip.

"If it will give you any pleasure, Monsieur," and, with a movement of her eyes and shoulders, which it would be impossible to describe, Madame extended towards the young man her beautiful and perfumed hand, upon which he pressed his lips. It was evident that he did so for some little time, and that Madame did not withdraw her hand too quickly, for the duke added:

"De Guiche is not wickedly disposed, Madame; so do not be afraid, he will not bite you."

A pretext was given in the gallery by the duke's remark, which was not, perhaps, very laughable, for every one to laugh excessively. The situation was odd enough, and some kindly disposed persons had observed it. Monsieur was still enjoying the effect of his remark, when the king was announced. The appearance of the room at that moment was as follows: - in the center, before the fireplace, which was filled with flowers, Madame was standing up, with her maids of honor formed in two wings, on either side of her; around whom the butterflies of the court were fluttering. Several other groups were formed in the recesses of the windows, like soldiers stationed in their different towers who belong to the same garrison. From their respective places they could pick up the remarks which fell from the principal group. From one of these groups, the nearest to the fireplace, Malicorne, who had been at once raised to the dignity, through Manicamp and De Guiche, of the post of master of the

apartments, and whose official costume had been ready for the last two months, was brilliant with gold lace, and shone upon Montalais, standing on Madame's extreme left, with all the fire of his eyes and splendor of his velvet. Madame was conversing with Mademoiselle de Chatillon and Mademoiselle de Crequy, who were next to her, and addressed a few words to Monsieur, who drew aside as soon as the king was announced. Mademoiselle de la Valliere, like Montalais, was on Madame's left hand, and the last but one on the line, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente being on her right. She was stationed as certain bodies of troops are, whose weakness is suspected, and who are placed between two experienced regiments. Guarded in this manner by the companions who had shared her adventure, La Valliere, whether from regret at Raoul's departure, or still suffering from the emotion caused by recent events, which had begun to render her name familiar on the lips of the courtiers, La Valliere, we repeat, hid her eyes, red with weeping, behind her fan, and seemed to give the greatest attention to the remarks which Montalais and Athenais, alternately, whispered to her from time to time. As soon as the king's name was announced a general movement took place in the apartment. Madame, in her character as hostess, rose to receive the royal visitor; but as she rose, notwithstanding her preoccupation of mind, she glanced hastily towards her right; her glance, which the presumptuous De Guiche regarded as intended for himself, rested, as it swept over the whole circle, upon La Valliere, whose warm blush and restless emotion it instantly perceived.

The king advanced to the middle of the group, which had now become a

general one, by a movement which took place from the circumference to the center. Every head bowed low before his majesty, the ladies bending like frail, magnificent lilies before King Aquilo. There was nothing very severe, we will even say, nothing very royal that evening about the king, except youth and good looks. He wore an air of animated joyousness and good-humor which set all imaginations at work, and, thereupon, all present promised themselves a delightful evening, for no other reason than from having remarked the desire his majesty had to amuse himself in Madame's apartments. If there was any one in particular whose high spirits and good-humor equalled the king's, it was M. de Saint-Aignan, who was dressed in a rose-colored costume, with face and ribbons of the same color, and, in addition, particularly rose-colored in his ideas, for that evening M. de Saint-Aignan was prolific in jests. The circumstance which had given a new expansion to the numerous ideas germinating in his fertile brain was, that he had just perceived that Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was, like himself, dressed in rose-color. We would not wish to say, however, that the wily courtier had not know beforehand that the beautiful Athenais was to wear that particular color; for he very well knew the art of unlocking the lips of a dress-maker or a lady's maid as to her mistress's intentions. He cast as many killing glances at Mademoiselle Athenais as he had bows of ribbons on his stockings and doublet; in other words he discharged a prodigious number. The king having paid Madame the customary compliments, and Madame having requested

him to be seated, the circle was immediately formed. Louis inquired of Monsieur the particulars of the day's bathing; and stated, looking at the

ladies present while he spoke, that certain poets were engaged turning into verse the enchanting diversion of the baths of Vulaines, and that one of them particularly, M. Loret, seemed to have been intrusted with the confidence of some water-nymph, as he had in his verses recounted many circumstances that were actually true - at which remark more than one lady present felt herself bound to blush. The king at this moment took the opportunity of looking round him at more leisure; Montalais was the only one who did not blush sufficiently to prevent her looking at the king, and she saw him fix his eyes devouringly on Mademoiselle de la Valliere. This undaunted maid of honor, Mademoiselle de Montalais, be it understood, forced the king to lower his gaze, and so saved Louise de la Valliere from a sympathetic warmth of feeling this gaze might possibly have conveyed. Louis was appropriated by Madame, who overwhelmed him with inquiries, and no one in the world knew how to ask questions better than she did. He tried, however, to render the conversation general, and, with the view of effecting this, he redoubled his attention and devotion to her. Madame coveted complimentary remarks, and, determined to procure them at any cost, she addressed herself to the king, saying:

"Sire, your majesty, who is aware of everything which occurs in your kingdom, ought to know beforehand the verses confided to M. Loret by this nymph; will your majesty kindly communicate them to us?"

"Madame," replied the king, with perfect grace of manner, "I dare not - you, personally, might be in no little degree confused at having to listen to certain details - but Saint-Aignan tells a story well, and has

a perfect recollection of the verses. If he does not remember them, he will invent. I can certify he is almost a poet himself." Saint-Aignan, thus brought prominently forward, was compelled to introduce himself as advantageously as possible. Unfortunately, however, for Madame, he thought of his own personal affairs only; in other words, instead of paying Madame the compliments she so much desired and relished, his mind
was fixed upon making as much display as possible of his own good fortune. Again glancing, therefore, for the hundredth time at the beautiful Athenais, who carried into practice her previous evening's theory of not even deigning to look at her adorer, he said: -

"Your majesty will perhaps pardon me for having too indifferently remembered the verses which the nymph dictated to Loret; but if the king has not retained any recollection of them, how could I possibly remember?"

Madame did not receive this shortcoming of the courtier very favorably.

"Ah! madame," added Saint-Aignan, "at present it is no longer a question what the water-nymphs have to say; and one would almost be tempted to believe that nothing of any interest now occurs in those liquid realms.
It is upon earth, madame, important events happen. Ah! Madame, upon the earth, how many tales are there full of - "

"Well," said Madame, "and what is taking place upon the earth?"

"That question must be asked of the Dryads," replied the comte; "the Dryads inhabit the forest, as your royal highness is aware."

"I am aware also, that they are naturally very talkative, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan."

"Such is the case, Madame; but when they say such delightful things, it would be ungracious to accuse them of being too talkative."

"Do they talk so delightfully, then?" inquired the princess, indifferently. "Really, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, you excite my curiosity; and, if I were the king, I would require you immediately to tell us what the delightful things are these Dryads have been saying, since you alone seem to understand their language."

"I am at his majesty's orders, Madame, in that respect," replied the comte, quickly.

"What a fortunate fellow this Saint-Aignan is to understand the language of the Dryads," said Monsieur.

"I understand it perfectly, monseigneur, as I do my own language."

"Tell us all about them, then," said Madame.

The king felt embarrassed, for his confidant was, in all probability,

about to embark in a difficult matter. He felt that it would be so, from the general attention excited by Saint-Aignan's preamble, and aroused too by Madame's peculiar manner. The most reserved of those who were present seemed ready to devour every syllable the comte was about to pronounce. They coughed, drew closer together, looked curiously at some of the maids of honor, who, in order to support with greater propriety, or with more steadiness, the fixity of the inquisitorial looks bent upon them, adjusted their fans accordingly, and assumed the bearing of a duelist about to be exposed to his adversary's fire. At this epoch, the fashion of ingeniously constructed conversations, and hazardously dangerous recitals, so prevailed, that, where, in modern times, a whole company assembled in a drawing-room would begin to suspect some scandal, or disclosure, or tragic event, and would hurry away in dismay, Madame's guests quietly settled themselves in their places, in order not to lose a word or gesture of the comedy composed by Monsieur de Saint-Aignan for their benefit, and the termination of which, whatever the style and the plot might be, must, as a matter of course, be marked by the most perfect propriety. The comte as known as a man of extreme refinement, and an admirable narrator. He courageously began, then, amidst a profound silence, which would have been formidable to any one but himself: -

"Madame, by the king's permission, I address myself, in the first place, to your royal highness, since you admit yourself to be the person present possessing the greatest curiosity. I have the honor, therefore, to inform your royal highness that the Dryad more particularly inhabits the hollows of oaks; and, as Dryads are mythological creatures of great beauty, they inhabit the most beautiful trees, in other words, the

largest to be found."

At this exordium, which recalled, under a transparent veil, the celebrated story of the royal oak, which had played so important a part in the last evening, so many hearts began to beat, both from joy and uneasiness, that, if Saint-Aignan had not had a good and sonorous voice, their throbbings might have been heard above the sound of his voice.

"There must surely be Dryads at Fontainebleau, then," said Madame, in a perfectly calm voice; "for I have never, in all my life, seen finer oaks than in the royal park." And as she spoke, she directed towards De Guiche a look of which he had no reason to complain, as he had of the one that preceded it; which, as we have already mentioned, had reserved a certain amount of indefiniteness most painful for so loving a heart as his.

"Precisely, Madame, it is of Fontainebleau I was about to speak to your royal highness," said Saint-Aignan; "for the Dryad whose story is engaging our attention, lives in the park belonging to the chateau of his majesty."

The affair was fairly embarked on; the action was begun, and it was no longer possible for auditory or narrator to draw back.

"It will be worth listening to," said Madame; "for the story not only appears to me to have all the interest of a national incident, but still

more, seems to be a circumstance of very recent occurrence."

"I ought to begin at the beginning," said the comte. "In the first place, then, there lived at Fontainebleau, in a cottage of modest and unassuming appearance, two shepherds. The one was the shepherd Tyrcis, the owner of extensive domains transmitted to him from his parents, by right of inheritance. Tyrcis was young and handsome, and, from his many qualifications, he might be pronounced to be the first and foremost among the shepherds in the whole country; one might even boldly say he was the king of shepherds." A subdued murmur of approbation encouraged the narrator, who continued: - "His strength equals his courage; no one displays greater address in hunting wild beasts, nor greater wisdom in matters where judgment is required. Whenever he mounts and exercises his horse in the beautiful plains of his inheritance, or whenever he joins with the shepherds who owe him allegiance, in different games of skill and strength, one might say that it is the god Mars hurling his lance on the plains of Thrace, or, even better, that it was Apollo himself, the god of day, radiant upon earth, bearing his flaming darts in his hand." Every one understood that this allegorical portrait of the king was not the worst exordium the narrator could have chosen; and consequently it did not fail to produce its effect, either upon those who, from duty or inclination, applauded it to the very echo, or on the king himself, to whom flattery was very agreeable when delicately conveyed, and whom, indeed, it did not always displease, even when it was a little too broad. Saint-Aignan then continued: - "It is not in games of glory only, ladies, that the shepherd Tyrcis had acquired that reputation by which he

was regarded as the king of the shepherds."

"Of the shepherds of Fontainebleau," said the king, smilingly, to Madame.

"Oh!" exclaimed Madame, "Fontainebleau is selected arbitrarily by the poet; but I should say, of the shepherds of the whole world." The king forgot his part of a passive auditor, and bowed.

"It is," paused Saint-Aignan, amidst a flattering murmur of applause, "it is with ladies fair especially that the qualities of this king of the shepherds are most prominently displayed. He is a shepherd with a mind as refined as his heart is pure; he can pay a compliment with a charm of manner whose fascination it is impossible to resist; and in his attachments he is so discreet, that beautiful and happy conquests may regard their lot as more than enviable. Never a syllable of disclosure, never a moment's forgetfulness. Whoever has seen and heard Tyrcis must love him; whoever loves and is beloved by him, has indeed found happiness." Saint-Aignan here paused; he was enjoying the pleasure of all these compliments; and the portrait he had drawn, however grotesquely inflated it might be, had found favor in certain ears, in which the perfections of the shepherd did not seem to have been exaggerated. Madame begged the orator to continue. "Tyrcis," said the comte, "had a faithful companion, or rather a devoted servant, whose name was - Amyntas."

"Ah!" said Madame, archly, "now for the portrait of Amyntas; you are such

an excellent painter, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan."

"Madame - "

"Oh! comte, do not, I entreat you, sacrifice poor Amyntas; I should never forgive you."

"Madame, Amyntas is of too humble a position, particularly beside Tyrcis, for his person to be honored by a parallel. There are certain friends who resemble those followers of ancient times, who caused themselves to be buried alive at their masters' feet. Amyntas's place, too, is at the feet of Tyrcis; he cares for no other; and if, sometimes, the illustrious hero - "

"Illustrious shepherd, you mean?" said Madame, pretending to correct M. de Saint-Aignan.

"Your royal highness is right; I was mistaken," returned the courtier; "if, I say, the shepherd Tyrcis deigns occasionally to call Amyntas his friend, and to open his heart to him, it is an unparalleled favor, which the latter regards as the most unbounded felicity."

"All that you say," interrupted Madame, "establishes the extreme devotion of Amyntas to Tyrcis, but does not furnish us with the portrait of Amyntas. Comte, do not flatter him, if you like; but describe him to us. I will have Amyntas's portrait." Saint-Aignan obeyed, after having

bowed profoundly to his majesty's sister-in-law.

"Amyntas," he said, "is somewhat older than Tyrcis; he is not an ill-favored shepherd; it is even said that the muses condescended to smile upon him at his birth, even as Hebe smiled upon youth. He is not ambitious of display, but he is ambitious of being loved; and he might not, perhaps, he found unworthy of it, if he were only sufficiently well-known."

This latter paragraph, strengthened by a killing glance, was directed straight to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who received them both unmoved. But the modesty and tact of the allusion had produced a good effect; Amyntas reaped the benefit of it in the applause bestowed upon him: Tyrcis's head even gave the signal for it by a consenting bow, full of good feeling.

"One evening," continued Saint-Aignan, "Tyrcis and Amyntas were walking together in the forest, talking of their love disappointments. Do not forget, ladies, that the story of the Dryad is now beginning, otherwise it would be easy to tell you what Tyrcis and Amyntas, the two most discreet shepherds of the whole earth, were talking about. They reached the thickest part of the forest, for the purpose of being quite alone, and of confiding their troubles more freely to each other, when suddenly the sound of voices struck upon their ears."

"Ah, ah!" said those who surrounded the narrator. "Nothing can be more

interesting."

At this point, Madame, like a vigilant general inspecting his army, glanced at Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who could not help wincing as they drew themselves up.

"These harmonious voices," resumed Saint-Aignan, "were those of certain shepherdesses, who had been likewise desirous of enjoying the coolness of the shade, and who, knowing the isolated and almost unapproachable situation of the place, had betaken themselves there to interchange their ideas upon - " A loud burst of laughter occasioned by this remark of Saint-Aignan, and an imperceptible smile of the king, as he looked at Tonnay-Charente, followed this sally.

"The Dryad affirms positively," continued Saint-Aignan, "that the shepherdesses were three in number, and that all three were young and beautiful."

"What were their names?" said Madame, quickly.

"Their names?" said Saint-Aignan, who hesitated from fear of committing an indiscretion.

"Of course; you call your shepherds Tyrcis and Amyntas; give your shepherdesses names in a similar manner."

"Oh! Madame, I am not an inventor; I relate simply what took place as the Dryad related it to me."

"What did your Dryad, then, call these shepherdesses? You have a very treacherous memory, I fear. This Dryad must have fallen out with the goddess Mnemosyne."

"These shepherdesses, Madame? Pray remember that it is a crime to betray a woman's name."

"From which a woman absolves you, comte, on the condition that you will reveal the names of the shepherdesses."

"Their names were Phyllis, Amaryllis, and Galatea."

"Exceedingly well! - they have not lost by the delay," said Madame, "and now we have three charming names. But now for their portraits."

Saint-Aignan again made a slight movement.

"Nay, comte, let us proceed in due order," returned Madame. "Ought we not, sire, to have the portraits of the shepherdesses?"

The king, who expected this determined perseverance, and who began to feel some uneasiness, did not think it safe to provoke so dangerous an

interrogator. He thought, too, that Saint-Aignan, in drawing the portraits, would find a means of insinuating some flattering allusions which would be agreeable to the ears of one his majesty was interested in pleasing. It was with this hope and with this fear that Louis authorized Saint-Aignan to sketch the portraits of the shepherdesses, Phyllis, Amaryllis, and Galatea.

"Very well, then; be it so," said Saint-Aignan, like a man who has made up his mind, and he began.