

## Chapter 57

### Conclusion of the Story of a Naiad and of a Dryad.

"Phyllis," said Saint-Aignan, with a glance of defiance at Montalais, such as a fencing-master would give who invites an antagonist worthy of him to place himself on guard, "Phyllis is neither fair nor dark, neither tall nor short, neither too grave nor too gay; though but a shepherdess, she is as witty as a princess, and as coquettish as the most finished flirt that ever lived. Nothing can equal her excellent vision. Her heart yearns for everything her gaze embraces. She is like a bird, which, always warbling, at one moment skims the ground, at the next rises fluttering in pursuit of a butterfly, then rests itself upon the topmost branch of a tree, where it defies the bird-catchers either to come and seize it or to entrap it in their nets." The portrait bore such a strong resemblance to Montalais, that all eyes were directed towards her; she, however, with her head raised, and with a steady, unmoved look, listened to Saint-Aignan, as if he were speaking of an utter stranger.

"Is that all, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan?" inquired the princess.

"Oh! your royal highness, the portrait is but a mere sketch, and many more additions could be made, but I fear to weary your patience, or offend the modesty of the shepherdess, and I shall therefore pass on to her companion, Amaryllis."

"Very well," said Madame, "pass on to Amaryllis, Monsieur de Saint-

Aignan, we are all attention."

"Amaryllis is the eldest of the three, and yet," Saint-Aignan hastened to add, "this advanced age does not reach twenty years."

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who had slightly knitted her brows at the commencement of the description, unbent them with a smile.

"She is tall, with an astonishing abundance of beautiful hair, which she fastens in the manner of the Grecian statues; her walk is full of majesty, her attitude haughty; she has the air, therefore, rather of a goddess than a mere mortal, and among the goddesses, she most resembles Diana the huntress; with this sole difference, however, that the cruel shepherdess, having stolen the quiver of young love, while poor Cupid was sleeping in a thicket of roses, instead of directing her arrows against the inhabitants of the forest, discharges them pitilessly against all poor shepherds who pass within reach of her bow and of her eyes."

"Oh! what a wicked shepherdess!" said Madame. "She may some day wound herself with one of those arrows she discharges, as you say, so mercilessly on all sides."

"It is the hope of shepherds, one and all!" said Saint-Aignan.

"And that of the shepherd Amyntas in particular, I suppose?" said Madame.

"The shepherd Amyntas is so timid," said Saint-Aignan, with the most modest air he could assume, "that if he cherishes such a hope as that, no one has ever known anything about it, for he conceals it in the very depths of his heart." A flattering murmur of applause greeted this profession of faith on behalf of the shepherd.

"And Galatea?" inquired Madame. "I am impatient to see a hand so skillful as yours continue the portrait where Virgil left it, and finish it before our eyes."

"Madame," said Saint-Aignan, "I am indeed a poor dumb post beside the mighty Virgil. Still, encouraged by your desire, I will do my best."

Saint-Aignan extended his foot and hand, and thus began: - "White as milk, she casts upon the breeze the perfume of her fair hair tinged with golden hues, as are the ears of corn. One is tempted to inquire if she is not the beautiful Europa, who inspired Jupiter with a tender passion as she played with her companions in the flower-spangled meadows. From her exquisite eyes, blue as azure heaven on the clearest summer day, emanates a tender light, which reverie nurtures, and love dispenses. When she frowns, or bends her looks towards the ground, the sun is veiled in token of mourning. When she smiles, on the contrary, nature resumes her jollity, and the birds, for a brief moment silenced, recommence their songs amid the leafy covert of the trees. Galatea," said Saint-Aignan, in conclusion, "is worthy of the admiration of the whole world; and if she should ever bestow her heart upon another, happy will that man be to

whom she consecrates her first affections."

Madame, who had attentively listened to the portrait Saint-Aignan had drawn, as, indeed, had all the others, contented herself with accentuating her approbation of the most poetic passage by occasional inclinations of her head; but it was impossible to say if these marks of assent were accorded to the ability of the narrator of the resemblance of the portrait. The consequence, therefore, was, that as Madame did not openly exhibit any approbation, no one felt authorized to applaud, not even Monsieur, who secretly thought that Saint-Aignan dwelt too much upon the portraits of the shepherdesses, and had somewhat slightly passed over the portraits of the shepherds. The whole assembly seemed suddenly chilled. Saint-Aignan, who had exhausted his rhetorical skill and his palette of artistic tints in sketching the portrait of Galatea, and who, after the favor with which his other descriptions had been received, already imagined he could hear the loudest applause allotted to this last one, was himself more disappointed than the king and the rest of the company. A moment's silence followed, which was at last broken by Madame.

"Well, sir," she inquired, "What is your majesty's opinion of these three portraits?"

The king, who wished to relieve Saint-Aignan's embarrassment without compromising himself, replied, "Why, Amaryllis, in my opinion, is beautiful."

"For my part," said Monsieur, "I prefer Phyllis; she is a capital girl, or rather a good-sort-of-fellow of a nymph."

A gentle laugh followed, and this time the looks were so direct, that Montalais felt herself blushing almost scarlet.

"Well," resumed Madame, "what were those shepherdesses saying to each other?"

Saint-Aignan, however, whose vanity had been wounded, did not feel himself in a position to sustain an attack of new and refreshed troops, and merely said, "Madame, the shepherdesses were confiding to one another their little preferences."

"Nay, nay! Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, you are a perfect stream of pastoral poesy," said Madame, with an amiable smile, which somewhat comforted the narrator.

"They confessed that love is a mighty peril, but that the absence of love is the heart's sentence of death."

"What was the conclusion they came to?" inquired Madame.

"They came to the conclusion that love was necessary."

"Very good! Did they lay down any conditions?"

"That of choice, simply," said Saint-Aignan. "I ought even to add, - remember it is the Dryad who is speaking, - that one of the shepherdesses, Amaryllis, I believe, was completely opposed to the necessity of loving, and yet she did not positively deny that she had allowed the image of a certain shepherd to take refuge in her heart."

"Was it Amyntas or Tyrcis?"

"Amyntas, Madame," said Saint-Aignan, modestly. "But Galatea, the gentle and soft-eyed Galatea, immediately replied, that neither Amyntas, nor Alphisiboeus, nor Tityrus, nor indeed any of the handsomest shepherds of the country, were to be compared to Tyrcis; that Tyrcis was as superior to all other men, as the oak to all other trees, as the lily in its majesty to all other flowers. She drew even such a portrait of Tyrcis that Tyrcis himself, who was listening, must have felt truly flattered at it, notwithstanding his rank as a shepherd. Thus Tyrcis and Amyntas had been distinguished by Phyllis and Galatea; and thus had the secrets of two hearts revealed beneath the shades of evening, and amid the recesses of the woods. Such, Madame, is what the Dryad related to me; she who knows all that takes place in the hollows of oaks and grassy dells; she who knows the loves of the birds, and all they wish to convey by their songs; she who understands, in fact, the language of the wind among the branches, the humming of the insect with its gold and emerald wings in the corolla of the wild-flowers; it was she who related the particulars

to me, and I have repeated them."

"And now you have finished, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, have you not?" said Madame, with a smile that made the king tremble.

"Quite finished," replied Saint-Aignan, "and but too happy if I have been able to amuse your royal highness for a few moments."

"Moments which have been too brief," replied the princess; "for you have related most admirably all you know; but, my dear Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, you have been unfortunate enough to obtain your information from one Dryad only, I believe?"

"Yes, Madame, only from one, I confess."

"The fact was, that you passed by a little Naiad, who pretended to know nothing at all, and yet knew a great deal more than your Dryad, my dear comte."

"A Naiad!" repeated several voices, who began to suspect that the story had a continuation.

"Of course close beside the oak you are speaking of, which, if I am not mistaken, is called the royal oak - is it not so, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan?"

Saint-Aignan and the king exchanged glances.

"Yes, Madame," the former replied.

"Well, close beside the oak there is a pretty little spring, which runs murmuringly over the pebbles, between banks of forget-me-nots and daffodils."

"I believe you are correct," said the king, with some uneasiness, and listening with some anxiety to his sister-in-law's narrative.

"Oh! there is one, I can assure you," said Madame; "and the proof of it is, that the Naiad who resides in that little stream stopped me as I was about to come."

"Ah?" said Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, indeed," continued the princess, "and she did so in order to communicate to me many particulars Monsieur de Saint-Aignan has omitted in his recital."

"Pray relate them yourself, then," said Monsieur, "you can relate stories in such a charming manner." The princess bowed at the conjugal compliment paid her.

"I do not possess the poetical powers of the comte, nor his ability to



bring to light the smallest details."

"You will not be listened to with less interest on that account," said the king, who already perceived that something hostile was intended in his sister-in-law's story.

"I speak, too," continued Madame, "in the name of that poor little Naiad, who is indeed the most charming creature I ever met. Moreover, she laughed so heartily while she was telling me her story, that, in pursuance of that medical axiom that laughter is the finest physic in the world, I ask permission to laugh a little myself when I recollect her words."

The king and Saint-Aignan, who noticed spreading over many of the faces present a distant and prophetic ripple of the laughter Madame announced, finished by looking at each other, as if asking themselves whether there was not some little conspiracy concealed beneath these words. But Madame was determined to turn the knife in the wound over and over again; she therefore resumed with the air of the most perfect candor, in other words, with the most dangerous of all her airs: "Well, then, I passed that way," she said, "and as I found beneath my steps many fresh flowers newly blown, no doubt Phyllis, Amaryllis, Galatea, and all your shepherdesses had passed the same way before me."

The king bit his lips, for the recital was becoming more and more threatening. "My little Naiad," continued Madame, "was cooing over her

quaint song in the bed of the rivulet; as I perceived that she accosted me by touching the hem of my dress, I could not think of receiving her advances ungraciously, and more particularly so, since, after all, a divinity, even though she be of a second grade, is always of greater importance than a mortal, though a princess. I thereupon accosted the Naiad, and bursting into laughter, this is what she said to me:

"Fancy, princess...' You understand, sire, it is the Naiad who is speaking?"

The king bowed assentingly; and Madame continued: - "Fancy, princess, the banks of my little stream have just witnessed a most amusing scene. Two shepherds, full of curiosity, even indiscreetly so, have allowed themselves to be mystified in a most amusing manner by three nymphs, or three shepherdesses,' - I beg your pardon, but I do not now remember if it was nymphs or shepherdesses she said; but it does not much matter, so we will continue."

The king, at this opening, colored visibly, and Saint-Aignan, completely losing countenance, began to open his eyes in the greatest possible anxiety.

"The two shepherds,' pursued my nymph, still laughing, 'followed in the wake of the three young ladies,' - no, I mean, of the three nymphs; forgive me, I ought to say, of the three shepherdesses. It is not always wise to do that, for it may be awkward for those who are followed. I

appeal to all the ladies present, and not one of them, I am sure, will contradict me."

The king, who was much disturbed by what he suspected was about to follow, signified his assent by a gesture.

"'But,' continued the Naiad, 'the shepherdesses had noticed Tyrcis and Amyntas gliding into the wood, and, by the light of the moon, they had recognized them through the grove of the trees.' Ah, you laugh!" interrupted Madame; "wait, wait, you are not yet at the end."

The king turned pale; Saint-Aignan wiped his forehead, now dewed with perspiration. Among the groups of ladies present could be heard smothered laughter and stealthy whispers.

"'The shepherdesses, I was saying, noticing how indiscreet the two shepherds were, proceeded to sit down at the foot of the royal oak; and, when they perceived that their over-curious listeners were sufficiently near, so that not a syllable of what they might say could be lost, they addressed towards them very innocently, in the most artless manner in the world indeed, a passionate declaration, which from the vanity natural to all men, and even to the most sentimental of shepherds, seemed to the two listeners as sweet as honey.'"

The king, at these words, which the assembly was unable to hear without laughing, could not restrain a flash of anger darting from his eyes. As

for Saint-Aignan, he let his head fall upon his breast, and concealed, under a silly laugh, the extreme annoyance he felt.

"Oh," said the king, drawing himself up to his full height, "upon my word, that is a most amusing jest, certainly; but, really and truly, are you sure you quite understood the language of the Naiads?"

"The comte, sire, pretends to have perfectly understood that of the Dryads," retorted Madame, icily.

"No doubt," said the king; "but you know the comte has the weakness to aspire to become a member of the Academy, so that, with this object in view, he has learnt all sorts of things of which very happily you are ignorant; and it might possibly happen that the language of the Nymph of the Waters might be among the number of things you have not studied."

"Of course, sire," replied Madame, "for facts of that nature one does not altogether rely upon one's self alone; a woman's ear is not infallible, so says Saint Augustine; and I, therefore, wished to satisfy myself by other opinions beside my own, and as my Naiad, who, in her character of a goddess, is polyglot, - is not that the expression, M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"I believe so," said the latter, quite out of countenance.

"Well," continued the princess, "as my Naiad, who, in her character of a goddess, had, at first spoken to me in English, I feared, as you suggest,

that I might have misunderstood her, and I requested Mesdemoiselles de Montalais, de Tonnay-Charente, and de la Valliere, to come to me, begging my Naiad to repeat to me in the French language, the recital she had already communicated to me in English."

"And did she do so?" inquired the king.

"Oh, she is the most polite divinity it is possible to imagine! Yes, sire, she did so; so that no doubt whatever remains on the subject. Is it not so, young ladies?" said the princess, turning towards the left of her army; "did not the Naiad say precisely what I have related, and have I, in any one particular, exceeded the truth, Phyllis? I beg your pardon, I mean Mademoiselle Aure de Montalais?"

"Precisely as you have stated, Madame," articulated Mademoiselle de Montalais, very distinctly.

"Is it true, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente?"

"The perfect truth," replied Athenais, in a voice quite as firm, but not yet so distinct.

"And you, La Valliere?" asked Madame.

The poor girl felt the king's ardent look fixed upon her, - she dared not deny - she dared not tell a falsehood; she merely bowed her head; and

everybody took it for a token of assent. Her head, however, was not raised again, chilled as she was by a coldness more bitter than that of death. This triple testimony overwhelmed the king. As for Saint-Aignan, he did not even attempt to dissemble his despair, and, hardly knowing what he said, he stammered out, "An excellent jest! admirably played!"

"A just punishment for curiosity," said the king, in a hoarse voice.

"Oh! who would think, after the chastisement that Tyrcis and Amyntas had suffered, of endeavoring to surprise what is passing in the heart of shepherdesses? Assuredly I shall not, for one; and, you, gentlemen?"

"Nor I! nor I!" repeated, in a chorus, the group of courtiers.

Madame was filled with triumph at the king's annoyance; and was full of delight, thinking that her story had been, or was to be, the termination of the whole affair. As for Monsieur, who had laughed at the two stories without comprehending anything about them, he turned towards De Guiche,

and said to him, "Well, comte, you say nothing; can you not find something to say? Do you pity M. Tyrcis and M. Amyntas, for instance?"

"I pity them with all my soul," replied De Guiche; "for, in very truth, love is so sweet a fancy, that to lose it, fancy though it may be, is to lose more than life itself. If, therefore, these two shepherds thought themselves beloved, - if they were happy in that idea, and if, instead of that happiness, they meet not only that empty void which resembles death,

but jeers and jests at love itself, which is worse than a thousand deaths, - in that case, I say that Tyrcis and Amyntas are the two most unhappy men I know."

"And you are right, too, Monsieur de Guiche," said the king; "for, in fact, the injury in question is a very hard return for a little harmless curiosity."

"That is as much to say, then, that the story of my Naiad has displeased the king?" asked Madame, innocently.

"Nay, Madame, undeceive yourself," said Louis, taking the princess by the hand; "your Naiad, on the contrary, has pleased me, and the more so, because she was so truthful, and because her tale, I ought to add, is confirmed by the testimony of unimpeachable witnesses."

These words fell upon La Valliere, accompanied by a look that on one, from Socrates to Montaigne, could have exactly defined. The look and the king's remark succeeded in overpowering the unhappy girl, who, with her head upon Montalais's shoulder, seemed to have fainted away. The king rose, without remarking this circumstance, of which no one, moreover, took any notice, and, contrary to his usual custom, for generally he remained late in Madame's apartments, he took his leave, and retired to his own side of the palace. Saint-Aignan followed him, leaving the rooms in as much despair as he had entered them with delight. Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, less sensitive than La Valliere, was not much

frightened, and did not faint. However, it may be that the last look of Saint-Aignan had hardly been so majestic as the king's.