

## Chapter 21. The Abbe Scarron.

There was once in the Rue des Tournelles a house known by all the sedan chairmen and footmen of Paris, and yet, nevertheless, this house was neither that of a great lord nor of a rich man. There was neither dining, nor playing at cards, nor dancing in that house. Nevertheless, it was the rendezvous of the great world and all Paris went there. It was the abode of the little Abbe Scarron.

In the home of the witty abbe dwelt incessant laughter; there all the items of the day had their source and were so quickly transformed, misrepresented, metamorphosed, some into epigrams, some into falsehoods, that every one was anxious to pass an hour with little Scarron, listening to what he said, reporting it to others.

The diminutive Abbe Scarron, who, however, was an abbe only because he owned an abbey, and not because he was in orders, had formerly been one of the gayest prebendaries in the town of Mans, which he inhabited. On a day of the carnival he had taken a notion to provide an unusual entertainment for that good town, of which he was the life and soul. He had made his valet cover him with honey; then, opening a feather bed, he had rolled in it and had thus become the most grotesque fowl it is possible to imagine. He then began to visit his friends of both sexes, in that strange costume. At first he had been followed through astonishment, then with derisive shouts, then the porters had insulted

him, then children had thrown stones at him, and finally he was obliged to run, to escape the missiles. As soon as he took to flight every one pursued him, until, pressed on all sides, Scarron found no way of escaping his escort, except by throwing himself into the river; but the water was icy cold. Scarron was heated, the cold seized on him, and when he reached the farther bank he found himself crippled.

Every means had been employed in vain to restore the use of his limbs. He had been subjected to a severe disciplinary course of medicine, at length he sent away all his doctors, declaring that he preferred the disease to the treatment, and came to Paris, where the fame of his wit had preceded him. There he had a chair made on his own plan, and one day, visiting Anne of Austria in this chair, she asked him, charmed as she was with his wit, if he did not wish for a title.

"Yes, your majesty, there is a title which I covet much," replied Scarron.

"And what is that?"

"That of being your invalid," answered Scarron.

So he was called the queen's invalid, with a pension of fifteen hundred francs.

From that lucky moment Scarron led a happy life, spending both income and principal. One day, however, an emissary of the cardinal's gave him to understand that he was wrong in receiving the coadjutor so often.

"And why?" asked Scarron; "is he not a man of good birth?"

"Certainly."

"Agreeable?"

"Undeniably."

"Witty?"

"He has, unfortunately, too much wit."

"Well, then, why do you wish me to give up seeing such a man?"

"Because he is an enemy."

"Of whom?"

"Of the cardinal."

"What?" answered Scarron, "I continue to receive Monsieur Gilles Despreaux, who thinks ill of me, and you wish me to give up seeing the coadjutor, because he thinks ill of another man. Impossible!"

The conversation had rested there and Scarron, through sheer obstinacy, had seen Monsieur de Gondy only the more frequently.

Now, the very morning of which we speak was that of his quarter-day payment, and Scarron, as usual, had sent his servant to get his money at the pension-office, but the man had returned and said that the government had no more money to give Monsieur Scarron.

It was on Thursday, the abbe's reception day; people went there in crowds. The cardinal's refusal to pay the pension was known about the town in half an hour and he was abused with wit and vehemence.

In the Rue Saint Honore Athos fell in with two gentlemen whom he did not know, on horseback like himself, followed by a lackey like himself, and going in the same direction that he was. One of them, hat in hand, said to him:

"Would you believe it, monsieur? that contemptible Mazarin has stopped poor Scarron's pension."

"That is unreasonable," said Athos, saluting in his turn the two cavaliers. And they separated with courteous gestures.

"It happens well that we are going there this evening," said Athos to the vicomte; "we will pay our compliments to that poor man."

"What, then, is this Monsieur Scarron, who thus puts all Paris in commotion? Is he some minister out of office?"

"Oh, no, not at all, vicomte," Athos replied; "he is simply a gentleman of great genius who has fallen into disgrace with the cardinal through

having written certain verses against him."

"Do gentlemen, then, make verses?" asked Raoul, naively, "I thought it was derogatory."

"So it is, my dear vicomte," said Athos, laughing, "to make bad ones; but to make good ones increases fame--witness Monsieur de Rotrou. Nevertheless," he continued, in the tone of one who gives wholesome advice, "I think it is better not to make them."

"Then," said Raoul, "this Monsieur Scarron is a poet?"

"Yes; you are warned, vicomte. Consider well what you do in that house. Talk only by gestures, or rather always listen."

"Yes, monsieur," replied Raoul.

"You will see me talking with one of my friends, the Abbe d'Herblay, of whom you have often heard me speak."

"I remember him, monsieur."

"Come near to us from time to time, as if to speak; but do not speak, and do not listen. That little stratagem may serve to keep off interlopers."

"Very well, monsieur; I will obey you at all points."

Athos made two visits in Paris; at seven o'clock he and Raoul directed their steps to the Rue des Tournelles; it was stopped by porters, horses and footmen. Athos forced his way through and entered, followed by the young man. The first person that struck him on his entrance was Aramis, planted near a great chair on castors, very large, covered with a canopy of tapestry, under which there moved, enveloped in a quilt of brocade, a little face, youngish, very merry, somewhat pallid, whilst its eyes never ceased to express a sentiment at once lively, intellectual, and amiable. This was the Abbe Scarron, always laughing, joking, complimenting--yet suffering--and toying nervously with a small switch.

Around this kind of rolling tent pressed a crowd of gentlemen and ladies. The room was neatly, comfortably furnished. Large valances of silk, embroidered with flowers of gay colors, which were rather faded, fell from the wide windows; the fittings of the room were simple, but in excellent taste. Two well trained servingmen were in attendance on the company. On perceiving Athos, Aramis advanced toward him, took him by the hand and presented him to Scarron. Raoul remained silent, for he was not prepared for the dignity of the *bel esprit*.

After some minutes the door opened and a footman announced Mademoiselle Paulet.

Athos touched the shoulder of the vicomte.

"Look at this lady, Raoul, she is an historic personage; it was to visit her King Henry IV. was going when he was assassinated."

Every one thronged around Mademoiselle Paulet, for she was always very much the fashion. She was a tall woman, with a slender figure and a forest of golden curls, such as Raphael was fond of and Titian has painted all his Magdalens with. This fawn-colored hair, or, perhaps the sort of ascendancy which she had over other women, gave her the name of "La Lionne." Mademoiselle Paulet took her accustomed seat, but before sitting down, she cast, in all her queen-like grandeur, a look around the room, and her eyes rested on Raoul.

Athos smiled.

"Mademoiselle Paulet has observed you, vicomte; go and bow to her; don't try to appear anything but what you are, a true country youth; on no account speak to her of Henry IV."

"When shall we two walk together?" Athos then said to Aramis.

"Presently--there are not a sufficient number of people here yet; we shall be remarked."

At this moment the door opened and in walked the coadjutor.

At this name every one looked around, for his was already a very celebrated name. Athos did the same. He knew the Abbe de Gondy only by report.

He saw a little dark man, ill made and awkward with his hands in everything--except drawing a sword and firing a pistol--with something

haughty and contemptuous in his face.

Scarron turned around toward him and came to meet him in his chair.

"Well," said the coadjutor, on seeing him, "you are in disgrace, then, abbe?"

This was the orthodox phrase. It had been said that evening a hundred times--and Scarron was at his hundredth bon mot on the subject; he was very nearly at the end of his humoristic tether, but one despairing effort saved him.

"Monsieur, the Cardinal Mazarin has been so kind as to think of me," he said.

"But how can you continue to receive us?" asked the coadjutor; "if your income is lessened I shall be obliged to make you a canon of Notre Dame."

"Oh, no!" cried Scarron, "I should compromise you too much."

"Perhaps you have resources of which we are ignorant?"

"I shall borrow from the queen."

"But her majesty has no property," interposed Aramis.

At this moment the door opened and Madame de Chevreuse was announced.



Every one arose. Scarron turned his chair toward the door, Raoul blushed, Athos made a sign to Aramis, who went and hid himself in the enclosure of a window.

In the midst of all the compliments that awaited her on her entrance, the duchess seemed to be looking for some one; at last she found out Raoul and her eyes sparkled; she perceived Athos and became thoughtful; she saw Aramis in the seclusion of the window and gave a start of surprise behind her fan.

"Apropos," she said, as if to drive away thoughts that pursued her in spite of herself, "how is poor Voiture, do you know, Scarron?"

"What, is Monsieur Voiture ill?" inquired a gentleman who had spoken to Athos in the Rue Saint Honore; "what is the matter with him?"

"He was acting, but forgot to take the precaution to have a change of linen ready after the performance," said the coadjutor, "so he took cold and is about to die."

"Is he then so ill, dear Voiture?" asked Aramis, half hidden by the window curtain.

"Die!" cried Mademoiselle Paulet, bitterly, "he! Why, he is surrounded by sultanas, like a Turk. Madame de Saintot has hastened to him with broth; La Renaudot warms his sheets; the Marquise de Rambouillet sends him his tisanes."

"You don't like him, my dear Parthenie," said Scarron.

"What an injustice, my dear invalid! I hate him so little that I should be delighted to order masses for the repose of his soul."

"You are not called 'Lionne' for nothing," observed Madame de Chevreuse, "your teeth are terrible."

"You are unjust to a great poet, it seems to me," Raoul ventured to say.

"A great poet! come, one may easily see, vicomte, that you are lately from the provinces and have never so much as seen him. A great poet! he is scarcely five feet high."

"Bravo bravo!" cried a tall man with an enormous mustache and a long rapier, "bravo, fair Paulet, it is high time to put little Voiture in his right place. For my part, I always thought his poetry detestable, and I think I know something about poetry."

"Who is this officer," inquired Raoul of Athos, "who is speaking?"

"Monsieur de Scudery, the author of 'Clelie,' and of 'Le Grand Cyrus,' which were composed partly by him and partly by his sister, who is now talking to that pretty person yonder, near Monsieur Scarron."

Raoul turned and saw two faces just arrived. One was perfectly charming, delicate, pensive, shaded by beautiful dark hair, and eyes soft as velvet, like those lovely flowers, the heartsease, in which shine out

the golden petals. The other, of mature age, seemed to have the former one under her charge, and was cold, dry and yellow--the true type of a duenna or a devotee.

Raoul resolved not to quit the room without having spoken to the beautiful girl with the soft eyes, who by a strange fancy, although she bore no resemblance, reminded him of his poor little Louise, whom he had left in the Chateau de la Valliere and whom, in the midst of all the party, he had never for one moment quite forgotten. Meantime Aramis had drawn near to the coadjutor, who, smiling all the while, contrived to drop some words into his ear. Aramis, notwithstanding his self-control, could not refrain from a slight movement of surprise.

"Laugh, then," said Monsieur de Retz; "they are looking at us." And leaving Aramis he went to talk with Madame de Chevreuse, who was in the midst of a large group.

Aramis affected a laugh, to divert the attention of certain curious listeners, and perceiving that Athos had betaken himself to the embrasure of a window and remained there, he proceeded to join him, throwing out a few words carelessly as he moved through the room.

As soon as the two friends met they began a conversation which was emphasized by frequent gesticulation.

Raoul then approached them as Athos had directed him to do.

"'Tis a rondeau by Monsieur Voiture that monsieur l'abbe is repeating

to me." said Athos in a loud voice, "and I confess I think it incomparable."

Raoul stayed only a few minutes near them and then mingled with the group round Madame de Chevreuse.

"Well, then?" asked Athos, in a low tone.

"It is to be to-morrow," said Aramis hastily.

"At what time?"

"Six o'clock."

"Where?"

"At Saint Mandé."

"Who told you?"

"The Count de Rochefort."

Some one drew near.

"And then philosophic ideas are wholly wanting in Voiture's works, but I am of the same opinion as the coadjutor--he is a poet, a true poet."

Aramis spoke so as to be heard by everybody.

"And I, too," murmured the young lady with the velvet eyes. "I have the misfortune also to admire his poetry exceedingly."

"Monsieur Scarron, do me the honor," said Raoul, blushing, "to tell me the name of that young lady whose opinion seems so different from that of others of the company."

"Ah! my young vicomte," replied Scarron, "I suppose you wish to propose to her an alliance offensive and defensive."

Raoul blushed again.

"You asked the name of that young lady. She is called the fair Indian."

"Excuse me, sir," returned Raoul, blushing still more deeply, "I know no more than I did before. Alas! I am from the country."

"Which means that you know very little about the nonsense which here flows down our streets. So much the better, young man! so much the better! Don't try to understand it--you will only lose your time."

"You forgive me, then, sir," said Raoul, "and you will deign to tell me who is the person that you call the young Indian?"

"Certainly; one of the most charming persons that lives--Mademoiselle Frances d'Aubigne."

"Does she belong to the family of the celebrated Agrippa, the friend of

Henry IV.?"

"His granddaughter. She comes from Martinique, so I call her the beautiful Indian."

Raoul looked surprised and his eyes met those of the young lady, who smiled.

The company went on speaking of the poet Voiture.

"Monsieur," said Mademoiselle d'Aubigne to Scarron, as if she wished to join in the conversation he was engaged in with Raoul, "do you not admire Monsieur Voiture's friends? Listen how they pull him to pieces even whilst they praise him; one takes away from him all claim to good sense, another robs him of his poetry, a third of his originality, another of his humor, another of his independence of character, a sixth--but, good heavens! what will they leave him? as Mademoiselle de Scudery remarks."

Scarron and Raoul laughed. The fair Indian, astonished at the sensation her observation produced, looked down and resumed her air of naivete.

Athos, still within the inclosure of the window, watched this scene with a smile of disdain on his lips.

"Tell the Comte de la Fere to come to me," said Madame de Chevreuse, "I want to speak to him."

"And I," said the coadjutor, "want it to be thought that I do not speak to him. I admire, I love him--for I know his former adventures--but I shall not speak to him until the day after to-morrow."

"And why day after to-morrow?" asked Madame de Chevreuse.

"You will know that to-morrow evening," said the coadjutor, smiling.

"Really, my dear Gondy," said the duchess, "you remind one of the Apocalypse. Monsieur d'Herblay," she added, turning toward Aramis, "will you be my servant once more this evening?"

"How can you doubt it?" replied Aramis; "this evening, to-morrow, always; command me."

"I will, then. Go and look for the Comte de la Fere; I wish to speak with him."

Aramis found Athos and brought him.

"Monsieur le comte," said the duchess, giving him a letter, "here is what I promised you; our young friend will be extremely well received."

"Madame, he is very happy in owing any obligation to you."

"You have no reason to envy him on that score, for I owe to you the pleasure of knowing him," replied the witty woman, with a smile which recalled Marie Michon to Aramis and to Athos.

As she uttered that bon mot, she arose and asked for her carriage.

Mademoiselle Paulet had already gone; Mademoiselle de Scudery was going.

"Vicomte," said Athos to Raoul, "follow the duchess; beg her to do you the favor to take your arm in going downstairs, and thank her as you descend."

The fair Indian approached Scarron.

"You are going already?" he said.

"One of the last, as you see; if you hear anything of Monsieur Voiture, be so kind as to send me word to-morrow."

"Oh!" said Scarron, "he may die now."

"Why?" asked the young girl with the velvet eyes.

"Certainly; his panegyric has been uttered."

They parted, laughing, she turning back to gaze at the poor paralytic man with interest, he looking after her with eyes of love.

One by one the several groups broke up. Scarron seemed not to observe that certain of his guests had talked mysteriously, that letters had passed from hand to hand and that the assembly had seemed to have a secret purpose quite apart from the literary discussion carried on



with so much ostentation. What was all that to Scarron? At his house rebellion could be planned with impunity, for, as we have said, since that morning he had ceased to be "the queen's invalid."

As to Raoul, he had attended the duchess to her carriage, where, as she took her seat, she gave him her hand to kiss; then, by one of those wild caprices which made her so adorable and at the same time so dangerous, she had suddenly put her arm around his neck and kissed his forehead, saying:

"Vicomte, may my good wishes and this kiss bring you good fortune!"

Then she had pushed him away and directed the coachman to stop at the Hotel de Luynes. The carriage had started, Madame de Chevreuse had made a parting gesture to the young man, and Raoul had returned in a state of stupefaction.

Athos surmised what had taken place and smiled. "Come, vicomte," he said, "it is time for you to go to bed; you will start in the morning for the army of monsieur le prince. Sleep well your last night as citizen."

"I am to be a soldier then?" said the young man. "Oh, monsieur, I thank you with all my heart."

"Adieu, count," said the Abbe d'Herblay; "I return to my convent."

"Adieu, abbe," said the coadjutor, "I am to preach to-morrow and have

twenty texts to examine this evening."

"Adieu, gentlemen," said the count; "I am going to sleep twenty-four hours; I am just falling down with fatigue."

The three men saluted one another, whilst exchanging a last look.

Scarron followed their movements with a glance from the corner of his eye.

"Not one of them will do as he says," he murmured, with his little monkey smile; "but they may do as they please, the brave gentlemen! Who knows if they will not manage to restore to me my pension? They can move their arms, they can, and that is much. Alas, I have only my tongue, but I will try to show that it is good for something. Ho, there, Champenois! here, it is eleven o'clock. Come and roll me to bed. Really, that Demoiselle d'Aubigne is very charming!"

So the invalid disappeared soon afterward and went into his sleeping-room; and one by one the lights in the salon of the Rue des Tournelles were extinguished.