

Vicomte de Bragelonne,

By

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Chapter I. The Letter.

Towards the middle of the month of May, in the year 1660, at nine o'clock in the morning, when the sun, already high in the heavens, was fast absorbing the dew from the ramparts of the castle of Blois, a little cavalcade, composed of three men and two pages, re-entered the city by the bridge, without producing any other effect upon the passengers of the quay beyond a first movement of the hand to the head, as a salute, and a second movement of the tongue to express, in the purest French then spoken in France: "There is Monsieur returning from hunting." And that was all.

Whilst, however, the horses were climbing the steep acclivity which leads from the river to the castle, several shop-boys approached the last horse, from whose saddle-bow a number of birds were suspended by the beak.

On seeing this, the inquisitive youths manifested with rustic freedom their contempt for such paltry sport, and, after a dissertation among themselves upon the disadvantages of hawking, they returned to their occupations; one only of the curious party, a stout, stubby, cheerful lad, having demanded how it was that Monsieur, who, from his great revenues, had it in his power to amuse himself so much better, could be satisfied with such mean diversions.

"Do you not know," one of the standers-by replied, "that Monsieur's principal amusement is to weary himself?"

The light-hearted boy shrugged his shoulders with a gesture which said as clear as day: "In that case I would rather be plain Jack than a prince." And all resumed their labors.

In the meanwhile, Monsieur continued his route with an air at once so melancholy and so majestic, that he certainly would have attracted the attention of spectators, if spectators there had been; but the good citizens of Blois could not pardon Monsieur for having chosen their gay city for an abode in which to indulge melancholy at his ease, and as often as they caught a glimpse of the illustrious ennuye, they stole away gaping, or drew back their heads into the interior of their dwellings, to escape the soporific influence of that long pale face, of those watery eyes, and that languid address; so that the worthy prince was almost certain to find the streets deserted whenever he chanced to pass through them.

Now, on the part of the citizens of Blois this was a culpable piece of disrespect, for Monsieur was, after the king--nay, even perhaps, before the king--the greatest noble of the kingdom. In fact, God, who had

granted to Louis XIV., then reigning, the honor of being son of Louis XIII., had granted to Monsieur the honor of being son of Henry IV. It was not then, or, at least, it ought not to have been, a trifling source of pride for the city of Blois, that Gaston of Orleans had chosen it as his residence, and held his court in the ancient Castle of the States.

But it was the destiny of this great prince to excite the attention and admiration of the public in a very modified degree wherever he might be. Monsieur had fallen into this situation by habit.

It was not, perhaps, this which gave him that air of listlessness. Monsieur had already been tolerably busy in the course of his life. A man cannot allow the heads of a dozen of his best friends to be cut off without feeling a little excitement; and as, since the accession of Mazarin to power, no heads had been cut off, Monsieur's occupation was gone, and his morale suffered from it.

The life of the poor prince was then very dull. After his little morning hawking-party on the banks of the Beuvron, or in the woods of Cheverny, Monsieur crossed the Loire, went to breakfast at Chambord, with or without an appetite, and the city of Blois heard no more of its sovereign lord and master till the next hawking-day.

So much for the ennui extra muros; of the ennui of the interior we will give the reader an idea if he will with us follow the cavalcade to the majestic porch of the Castle of the States.

Monsieur rode a little steady-paced horse, equipped with a large saddle of red Flemish velvet, with stirrups in the shape of buskins; the horse was of a bay color; Monsieur's pourpoint of crimson velvet corresponded with the cloak of the same shade and the horse's equipment, and it was only by this red appearance of the whole that the prince could be known from his two companions, the one dressed in violet, the other in green. He on the left, in violet, was his equerry; he on the right, in green, was the grand veneur.

One of the pages carried two gerfalcons upon a perch, the other a hunting-horn, which he blew with a careless note at twenty paces from the castle. Every one about this listless prince did what he had to listlessly.

At this signal, eight guards, who were lounging in the sun in the square court, ran to their halberts, and Monsieur made his solemn entry into the castle.

When he had disappeared under the shades of the porch, three or four idlers, who had followed the cavalcade to the castle, after pointing out the suspended birds to each other, dispersed with comments upon what they saw: and, when they were gone, the street, the palace, and the

court, all remained deserted alike.

Monsieur dismounted without speaking a word, went straight to his apartments, where his valet changed his dress, and as Madame had not yet sent orders respecting breakfast, Monsieur stretched himself upon a chaise longue, and was soon as fast asleep as if it had been eleven o'clock at night.

The eight guards, who concluded their service for the day was over, laid themselves down very comfortably in the sun upon some stone benches; the grooms disappeared with their horses into the stables, and, with the exception of a few joyous birds, startling each other with their sharp chirping in the tufted shrubberies, it might have been thought that the whole castle was as soundly asleep as Monsieur was.

All at once, in the midst of this delicious silence, there resounded a clear ringing laugh, which caused several of the halberdiers in the enjoyment of their siesta to open at least one eye.

This burst of laughter proceeded from a window of the castle, visited at this moment by the sun, that embraced it in one of those large angles which the profiles of the chimneys mark out upon the walls before mid-day.

The little balcony of wrought iron which advanced in front of this window was furnished with a pot of red gilliflowers, another pot of primroses, and an early rose-tree, the foliage of which, beautifully green, was variegated with numerous red specks announcing future roses.

In the chamber lighted by this window, was a square table, covered with an old large-flowered Haarlem tapestry; in the center of this table was a long-necked stone bottle, in which were irises and lilies of the valley; at each end of this table was a young girl.

The position of these two young people was singular; they might have been taken for two boarders escaped from a convent. One of them, with both elbows on the table, and a pen in her hand, was tracing characters upon a sheet of fine Dutch paper; the other, kneeling upon a chair, which allowed her to advance her head and bust over the back of it to the middle of the table, was watching her companion as she wrote, or rather hesitated to write.

Thence the thousand cries, the thousand railleries, the thousand laughs, one of which, more brilliant than the rest, had startled the birds in the gardens, and disturbed the slumbers of Monsieur's guards.

We are taking portraits now; we shall be allowed, therefore, we hope, to sketch the two last of this chapter.

The one who was leaning in the chair--that is to say, the joyous, laughing one--was a beautiful girl of from eighteen to twenty, with brown complexion and brown hair, splendid, from eyes which sparkled beneath strongly-marked brows, and particularly from her teeth, which seemed to shine like pearls between her red coral lips. Her every movement seemed the accent of a sunny nature; she did not walk--she bounded.

The other, she who was writing, looked at her turbulent companion with an eye as limpid, as pure, and as blue as the azure of the day. Her hair, of a shaded fairness, arranged with exquisite taste, fell in silky curls over her lovely mantling cheeks; she passed across the paper a delicate hand, whose thinness announced her extreme youth. At each burst of laughter that proceeded from her friend, she raised, as if annoyed, her white shoulders in a poetical and mild manner, but they were wanting in that richness of mold that was likewise to be wished in her arms and hands.

"Montalais! Montalais!" said she at length, in a voice soft and caressing as a melody, "you laugh too loud--you laugh like a man! You will not only draw the attention of messieurs the guards, but you will not hear Madame's bell when Madame rings."

This admonition neither made the young girl called Montalais cease to laugh nor gesticulate. She only replied: "Louise, you do not speak as you think, my dear; you know that messieurs the guards, as you call them, have only just commenced their sleep, and that a cannon would not waken them; you know that Madame's bell can be heard at the bridge of Blois, and that consequently I shall hear it when my services are required by Madame. What annoys you, my child, is that I laugh while you are writing; and what you are afraid of is that Madame de Saint-Remy, your mother, should come up here, as she does sometimes when we laugh too loud, that she should surprise us, and that she should see that enormous sheet of paper upon which, in a quarter of an hour, you have only traced the words Monsieur Raoul. Now, you are right, my dear Louise, because after these words, 'Monsieur Raoul', others may be put so significant and incendiary as to cause Madame Saint-Remy to burst out into fire and flames! Hein! is not that true now?--say."

And Montalais redoubled her laughter and noisy provocations.

The fair girl at length became quite angry; she tore the sheet of paper on which, in fact, the words "Monsieur Raoul" were written in good characters; and crushing the paper in her trembling hands, she threw it out of the window.

"There! there!" said Mademoiselle de Montalais; "there is our little lamb, our gentle dove, angry! Don't be afraid, Louise--Madame de Saint-Remy will not come; and if she should, you know I have a quick

ear. Besides, what can be more permissible than to write to an old friend of twelve years' standing, particularly when the letter begins with the words 'Monsieur Raoul'?"

"It is all very well--I will not write to him at all," said the young girl.

"Ah, ah! in good sooth, Montalais is properly punished," cried the jeering brunette, still laughing. "Come, come! let us try another sheet of paper, and finish our dispatch off-hand. Good! there is the bell ringing now. By my faith, so much the worse! Madame must wait, or else do without her first maid of honor this morning."

A bell, in fact, did ring; it announced that Madame had finished her toilette, and waited for Monsieur to give her his hand, and conduct her from the salon to the refectory.

This formality being accomplished with great ceremony, the husband and wife breakfasted, and then separated till the hour of dinner, invariably fixed at two o'clock.

The sound of this bell caused a door to be opened in the offices on the left hand of the court, from which filed two maitres d'hotel followed by eight scullions bearing a kind of hand-barrow loaded with dishes under silver covers.

One of the maitres d'hotel, the first in rank, touched one of the guards, who was snoring on his bench, slightly with his wand; he even carried his kindness so far as to place the halbert which stood against the wall in the hands of the man stupid with sleep, after which the soldier, without explanation, escorted the viande of Monsieur to the refectory, preceded by a page and the two maitres d'hotel.

Wherever the viande passed, the soldiers ported arms.

Mademoiselle de Montalais and her companion had watched from their window the details of this ceremony, to which, by the bye, they must have been pretty well accustomed. But they did not look so much from curiosity as to be assured they should not be disturbed. So, guards, scullions, maitres d'hotel, and pages having passed, they resumed their places at the table; and the sun, which, through the window-frame, had for an instant fallen upon those two charming countenances, now only shed its light upon the gilliflowers, primroses, and rose-tree.

"Bah!" said Mademoiselle de Montalais, taking her place again; "Madame will breakfast very well without me!"

"Oh! Montalais, you will be punished!" replied the other girl, sitting down quietly in hers.

"Punished, indeed!--that is to say, deprived of a ride! That is just the way in which I wish to be punished. To go out in the grand coach, perched upon a doorstep; to turn to the left, twist round to the right, over roads full of ruts, where we cannot exceed a league in two hours; and then to come back straight towards the wing of the castle in which is the window of Mary de Medici, so that Madame never fails to say: 'Could one believe it possible that Mary de Medici should have escaped from that window--forty-seven feet high? The mother of two princes and three princesses!' If you call that relaxation, Louise, all I ask is to be punished every day; particularly when my punishment is to remain with you and write such interesting letters as we write!"

"Montalais! Montalais! there are duties to be performed."

"You talk of them very much at your ease, dear child!--you, who are left quite free amidst this tedious court. You are the only person that reaps the advantages of them without incurring the trouble,--you, who are really more one of Madame's maids of honor than I am, because Madame makes her affection for your father-in-law glance off upon you; so that you enter this dull house as the birds fly into yonder court, inhaling the air, pecking the flowers, picking up the grain, without having the least service to perform, or the least annoyance to undergo. And you talk to me of duties to be performed! In sooth, my pretty idler, what are your own proper duties, unless to write to the handsome Raoul? And even that you don't do; so that it looks to me as if you likewise were rather negligent of your duties!"

Louise assumed a serious air, leant her chin upon her hand, and, in a tone full of candid remonstrance, "And do you reproach me with my good fortune?" said she. "Can you have the heart to do it? You have a future; you will belong to the court; the king, if he should marry, will require Monsieur to be near his person; you will see splendid fetes, you will see the king, who they say is so handsome, so agreeable!"

"Ay, and still more, I shall see Raoul, who attends upon M. le Prince," added Montalais, maliciously.

"Poor Raoul!" sighed Louise.

"Now is the time to write to him, my pretty dear! Come, begin again, with that famous 'Monsieur Raoul' which figures at the top of the poor torn sheet."

She then held the pen toward her, and with a charming smile encouraged her hand, which quickly traced the words she named.

"What next?" asked the younger of the two girls.

"Why, now write what you think, Louise," replied Montalais.

"Are you quite sure I think of anything?"

"You think of somebody, and that amounts to the same thing, or rather even more."

"Do you think so, Montalais?"

"Louise, Louise, your blue eyes are as deep as the sea I saw at Boulogne last year! No, no, I mistake--the sea is perfidious: your eyes are as deep as the azure yonder--look!--over our heads!"

"Well, since you can read so well in my eyes, tell me what I am thinking about, Montalais."

"In the first place, you don't think, Monsieur Raoul; you think, My dear Raoul."

"Oh!--"

"Never blush for such a trifle as that! 'My dear Raoul,' we will say--'You implore me to write you at Paris, where you are detained by your attendance on M. le Prince. As you must be very dull there, to seek for amusement in the remembrance of a provinciale--'"

Louise rose up suddenly. "No, Montalais," said she, with a smile; "I don't think a word of that. Look, this is what I think;" and she seized the pen boldly, and traced, with a firm hand, the following words:

"I should have been very unhappy if your entreaties to obtain a remembrance of me had been less warm. Everything here reminds me of our early days, which so quickly passed away, which so delightfully flew by, that no others will ever replace the charm of them in my heart."

Montalais, who watched the flying pen, and read, the wrong way upwards, as fast as her friend wrote, here interrupted by clapping her hands. "Capital!" cried she; "there is frankness--there is heart--there is style! Show these Parisians, my dear, that Blois is the city for fine language!"

"He knows very well that Blois was a Paradise to me," replied the girl.

"That is exactly what you mean to say; and you speak like an angel."

"I will finish, Montalais," and she continued as follows: "You often think of me, you say, Monsieur Raoul: I thank you; but that does not surprise me, when I recollect how often our hearts have beaten close to each other."

"Oh! oh!" said Montalais. "Beware, my lamb! You are scattering your wool, and there are wolves about."

Louise was about to reply, when the gallop of a horse resounded under the porch of the castle.

"What is that?" said Montalais, approaching the window. "A handsome cavalier, by my faith!"

"Oh!--Raoul!" exclaimed Louise, who had made the same movement as her friend, and, becoming pale as death, sunk back beside her unfinished letter.

"Now, he is a clever lover, upon my word!" cried Montalais; "he arrives just at the proper moment."

"Come in, come in, I implore you!" murmured Louise.

"Bah! he does not know me. Let me see what he has come here for."