

Chapter XXXV. On the Canal.

Upon the green waters of the canal bordered with marble, upon which time had already scattered black spots and tufts of mossy grass, there glided majestically a long, flat bark adorned with the arms of England, surmounted by a dais, and carpeted with long damasked stuffs, which trailed their fringes in the water. Eight rowers, leaning lazily to their oars, made it move upon the canal with the graceful slowness of the swans, which, disturbed in their ancient possessions by the approach of the bark, looked from a distance at this splendid and noisy pageant. We say noisy--for the bark contained four guitar and lute players, two singers, and several courtiers, all sparkling with gold and precious stones, and showing their white teeth in emulation of each other, to please the Lady Henrietta Stuart, grand-daughter of Henry IV., daughter of Charles I., and sister of Charles II., who occupied the seat of honor under the dais of the bark. We know this young princess, we have seen her at the Louvre with her mother, wanting wood, wanting bread, and fed by the coadjuteur and the parliament. She had, therefore, like her brothers, passed through an uneasy youth; then, all at once, she had just awakened from a long and horrible dream, seated on the steps of a throne, surrounded by courtiers and flatterers. Like Mary Stuart on leaving prison, she aspired not only to life and liberty, but to power and wealth.

The Lady Henrietta, in growing, had attained remarkable beauty, which the recent restoration had rendered celebrated. Misfortune had taken from her the luster of pride, but prosperity had restored it to her. She was resplendent, then, in her joy and her happiness,--like those hot-house flowers which, forgotten during a frosty autumn night, have hung their heads, but which on the morrow, warmed once more by the atmosphere in which they were born, rise again with greater splendor than ever. Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, son of him who played so conspicuous a part in the early chapters of this history,--Villiers of Buckingham, a handsome cavalier, melancholy with women, a jester with men,--and Wilmot, Lord Rochester, a jester with both sexes, were standing at this moment before the Lady Henrietta, disputing the privilege of making her smile. As to that young and beautiful princess, reclining upon a cushion of velvet bordered with gold, her hands hanging listlessly so as to dip in the water, she listened carelessly to the musicians without hearing them, and heard the two courtiers without appearing to listen to them.

This Lady Henrietta--this charming creature--this woman who joined the graces of France to the beauties of England, not having yet loved, was cruel in her coquetry. The smile, then,--that innocent favor of young girls,--did not even lighten her countenance; and if, at times, she did

raise her eyes, it was to fasten them upon one or other of the cavaliers with such a fixity, that their gallantry, bold as it generally was, took the alarm, and became timid.

In the meanwhile the boat continued its course, the musicians made a great noise, and the courtiers began, like them, to be out of breath. Besides, the excursion became doubtless monotonous to the princess, for all at once, shaking her head with an air of impatience,--"Come gentlemen,--enough of this;--let us land."

"Ah, madam," said Buckingham, "we are very unfortunate! We have not succeeded in making the excursion agreeable to your royal highness."

"My mother expects me," replied the princess; "and I must frankly admit, gentlemen, I am bored." And whilst uttering this cruel word, Henrietta endeavored to console by a look each of the two young men, who appeared terrified at such frankness. The look produced its effect--the two faces brightened; but immediately, as if the royal coquette thought she had done too much for simple mortals, she made a movement, turned her back on both her adorers, and appeared plunged in a reverie in which it was evident they had no part.

Buckingham bit his lips with anger, for he was truly in love with the Lady Henrietta, and, in that case, took everything in a serious light. Rochester bit his lips likewise; but his wit always dominated over his heart, it was purely and simply to repress a malicious smile. The princess was then allowing the eyes she turned from the young nobles to wander over the green and flowery turf of the park, when she perceived Parry and D'Artagnan at a distance.

"Who is coming yonder?" said she.

The two young men turned round with the rapidity of lightning.

"Parry," replied Buckingham; "nobody but Parry."

"I beg your pardon," said Rochester, "but I think he has a companion."

"Yes," said the princess, at first with languor, but then,--"What mean those words, 'Nobody but Parry;' say, my lord?"

"Because, madam," replied Buckingham, piqued, "because the faithful Parry, the wandering Parry, the eternal Parry, is not, I believe, of much consequence."

"You are mistaken, duke. Parry--the wandering Parry, as you call him--has always wandered in the service of my family, and the sight of that old man always gives me satisfaction."

The Lady Henrietta followed the usual progress of pretty women, particularly coquettish women; she passed from caprice to contradiction;--the gallant had undergone the caprice, the courtier must bend beneath the contradictory humor. Buckingham bowed, but made no reply.

"It is true, madam," said Rochester, bowing in his turn, "that Parry is the model of servants; but, madam, he is no longer young, and we laugh only when we see cheerful objects. Is an old man a gay object?"

"Enough, my lord," said the princess, coolly; "the subject of conversation is unpleasant to me."

Then, as if speaking to herself, "It is really unaccountable," said she, "how little regard my brother's friends have for his servants."

"Ah, madam," cried Buckingham, "your royal highness pierces my heart with a dagger forged by your own hands."

"What is the meaning of that speech, which is turned so like a French madrigal, duke? I do not understand it."

"It means, madam, that you yourself, so good, so charming, so sensible, you have laughed sometimes--smiled, I should say--at the idle prattle of that good Parry, for whom your royal highness to-day entertains such a marvelous susceptibility."

"Well, my lord, if I have forgotten myself so far," said Henrietta, "you do wrong to remind me of it." And she made a sign of impatience. "The good Parry wants to speak to me, I believe: please order them to row to the shore, my Lord Rochester."

Rochester hastened to repeat the princess's command; and a moment later the boat touched the bank.

"Let us land, gentlemen," said Henrietta, taking the arm which Rochester offered her, although Buckingham was nearer to her, and had presented his. Then Rochester, with an ill-dissembled pride, which pierced the heart of the unhappy Buckingham through and through, led the princess across the little bridge which the rowers had cast from the royal boat to the shore.

"Which way will your highness go?" asked Rochester.

"You see, my lord, towards that good Parry, who is wandering, as my lord of Buckingham says, and seeking me with eyes weakened by the tears he has shed over our misfortunes."

"Good heavens!" said Rochester, "how sad your royal highness is to-day; in truth we seem ridiculous fools to you, madam."

"Speak for yourself, my lord," interrupted Buckingham with vexation; "for my part, I displease her royal highness to such a degree, that I appear absolutely nothing to her."

Neither Rochester nor the princess made any reply; Henrietta only urged her companion more quickly on. Buckingham remained behind, and took advantage of this isolation to give himself up to his anger; he bit his handkerchief so furiously that it was soon in shreds.

"Parry, my good Parry," said the princess, with her gentle voice, "come hither. I see you are seeking me, and I am waiting for you."

"Ah, madam," said Rochester, coming charitably to the help of his companion, who had remained, as we have said, behind, "if Parry cannot see your royal highness, the man who follows him is a sufficient guide, even for a blind man; for he has eyes of flame. That man is a double-lamped lantern."

"Lighting a very handsome martial countenance," said the princess, determined to be as ill-natured as possible. Rochester bowed. "One of those vigorous soldiers' heads seen nowhere but in France," added the princess, with the perseverance of a woman sure of impunity.

Rochester and Buckingham looked at each other, as much as to say,--"What can be the matter with her?"

"See, my lord of Buckingham, what Parry wants," said Henrietta. "Go!"

The young man, who considered this order as a favor, resumed his courage, and hastened to meet Parry, who, followed by D'Artagnan, advanced slowly on account of his age. D'Artagnan walked slowly but nobly, as D'Artagnan, doubled by the third of a million, ought to walk, that is to say, without conceit or swagger, but without timidity. When Buckingham, very eager to comply with the desire of the princess, who had seated herself on a marble bench, as if fatigued with the few steps she had gone,--when Buckingham, we say, was at a distance of only a few paces from Parry, the latter recognized him.

"Ah! my lord!" cried he, quite out of breath, "will your grace obey the king?"

"In what, Mr. Parry?" said the young man, with a kind of coolness tempered by a desire to make himself agreeable to the princess.

"Well, his majesty begs your grace to present this gentleman to her royal highness the Princess Henrietta."

"In the first place, what is the gentleman's name?" said the duke, haughtily.

D'Artagnan, as we know, was easily affronted, and the Duke of Buckingham's tone displeased him. He surveyed the courtier from head to foot, and two flashes beamed from beneath his bent brows. But, after a struggle,--"Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan, my lord," replied he, quietly.

"Pardon me, sir, that teaches me your name, but nothing more."

"You mean--"

"I mean I do not know you."

"I am more fortunate than you, sir," replied D'Artagnan, "for I have had the honor of knowing your family, and particularly my lord Duke of Buckingham, your illustrious father."

"My father?" said Buckingham. "Well, I think I now remember. Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan, do you say?"

D'Artagnan bowed. "In person," said he.

"Pardon me, but are you one of those Frenchmen who had secret relations with my father?"

"Exactly, my lord duke, I am one of those Frenchmen."

"Then, sir, permit me to say that it was strange my father never heard of you during his lifetime."

"No, monsieur, but he heard of me at the moment of his death: it was I who sent to him, through the hands of the valet de chambre of Anne of Austria, notice of the dangers which threatened him; unfortunately, it came too late."

"Never mind, monsieur," said Buckingham. "I understand now, that, having had the intention of rendering a service to the father, you have come to claim the protection of the son."

"In the first place, my lord," replied D'Artagnan, phlegmatically, "I claim the protection of no man. His majesty, Charles II., to whom I have had the honor of rendering some services--I may tell you, my lord, my life has been passed in such occupations--King Charles II., then, who wishes to honor me with some kindness, desires me to be presented to her royal highness the Princess Henrietta, his sister, to whom I shall, perhaps, have the good fortune to be of service hereafter. Now, the king

knew that you at this moment were with her royal highness, and sent me to you. There is no other mystery, I ask absolutely nothing of you; and if you will not present me to her royal highness, I shall be compelled to do without you, and present myself."

"At least, sir," said Buckingham, determined to have the last word, "you will not refuse me an explanation provoked by yourself."

"I never refuse, my lord," said D'Artagnan.

"As you have had relations with my father, you must be acquainted with some private details?"

"These relations are already far removed from us, my lord--for you were not then born--and for some unfortunate diamond studs, which I received from his hands and carried back to France, it is really not worth while awakening so many remembrances."

"Ah! sir," said Buckingham, warmly, going up to D'Artagnan, and holding out his hand to him, "it is you, then--you whom my father sought everywhere and who had a right to expect so much from us."

"To expect, my lord, in truth, that is my forte; all my life I have expected."

At this moment, the princess, who was tired of not seeing the stranger approach her, arose and came towards them.

"At least, sir," said Buckingham, "you shall not wait for the presentation you claim of me."

Then turning towards the princess and bowing: "Madam," said the young man, "the king, your brother, desires me to have the honor of presenting to your royal highness, Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan."

"In order that your royal highness may have, in case of need, a firm support and a sure friend," added Parry. D'Artagnan bowed.

"You have still something to say, Parry," replied Henrietta, smiling upon D'Artagnan, while addressing the old servant.

"Yes, madam, the king desires you to preserve religiously in your memory the name and merit of M. d'Artagnan, to whom his majesty owes, he says, the recovery of his kingdom." Buckingham, the princess, and Rochester looked at each other.

"That," said D'Artagnan, "is another little secret, of which, in all probability, I shall not boast to his majesty's son, as I have done to you with respect to the diamond studs."

"Madam," said Buckingham, "monsieur has just, for the second time, recalled to my memory an event which excites my curiosity to such a degree, that I shall venture to ask your permission to take him to one side for a moment, to converse in private."

"Do, my lord," said the princess; "but restore to the sister, as quickly as possible, this friend so devoted to the brother." And she took the arm of Rochester, whilst Buckingham took that of D'Artagnan.

"Oh! tell me, chevalier," said Buckingham, "all that affair of the diamonds, which nobody knows in England, not even the son of him who was the hero of it."

"My lord, one person alone had a right to relate all that affair, as you call it, and that was your father; he thought it proper to be silent, I must beg you to allow me to be so likewise." And D'Artagnan bowed like a man upon whom it was evident no entreaties could prevail.

"Since it is so, sir," said Buckingham, "pardon my indiscretion, I beg you; and if, at any time, I should go into France--" and he turned round to take a last look at the princess, who took but little notice of him, totally occupied as she was, or appeared to be, with Rochester. Buckingham sighed.

"Well?" said D'Artagnan.

"I was saying that if, any day, I were to go to France--"

"You will go, my lord," said D'Artagnan, "I shall answer for that."

"And how so?"

"Oh, I have strange powers of prediction; if I do predict anything I am seldom mistaken. If, then, you do come to France?"

"Well, then, monsieur, you, of whom kings ask that valuable friendship which restores crowns to them, I will venture to beg of you a little of that great interest you took in my father."

"My lord," replied D'Artagnan, "believe me, I shall deem myself highly honored if, in France, you remember having seen me here. And now permit--"

Then, turning towards the princess: "Madam," said he, "your royal highness is a daughter of France; and in that quality I hope to see you again in Paris. One of my happy days will be on that on which your royal highness shall give me any command whatever, thus proving to me that you

have not forgotten the recommendations of your august brother." And he bowed respectfully to the young princess, who gave him her hand to kiss with a right royal grace.

"Ah! madam," said Buckingham, in a subdued voice, "what can a man do to obtain a similar favor from your royal highness?"

"Dame! my lord," replied Henrietta, "ask Monsieur d'Artagnan; he will tell you."