

Chapter 76

THE JOURNEY.

They set off. Aurilly affected the most perfect equality with Remy, and showed to Diana the greatest respect. But this respect was very interested. Indeed, to hold the stirrup of a woman when she mounts or dismounts, to watch each of her movements with solicitude, to let slip no occasion of picking up her glove, is the role either of a lover, a servant, or a spy. In touching Diana's glove Aurilly saw her hand, in clasping her cloak he peeped under her mask, and always did his utmost to see that face which the duke had not been able to recognize, but which he doubted not he should be able to. But Aurilly had to deal with one as skillful as himself; Remy claimed to perform his ordinary services to Diana, and seemed jealous of Aurilly, while Diana herself, without appearing to have any suspicions, begged Aurilly not to interfere with the services which her old attendant was accustomed to render to her. Aurilly was then reduced to hoping for rain or sun to make her remove her mask; but neither rain nor sun had any effect, and whenever they stopped Diana took her meals in her own room. Aurilly tried to look through the keyholes, but Diana always sat with her back to the door. He tried to peep through the windows, but there were always thick curtains drawn, or if none were there, cloaks were hung up to supply their place. Neither questions, nor attempts at corruption, succeeded with Remy, who always declared that his mistress's will was his.

"But these precautions are, then, taken only on my account?" said Aurilly.

"No, for everybody."

"But M. d'Anjou saw her; she was not hidden then."

"Pure chance; but it is just because he did see her that she is more careful than ever."

Days passed on, and they were nearing their destination, but Aurilly's curiosity had not been gratified. Already Picardy appeared to the eyes of the travelers.

Aurilly began to lose patience, and the bad passions of his nature to gain the ascendant. He began to suspect some secret under all this mystery. One day he remained a little behind with Remy, and renewed his attempts at seduction, which Remy repulsed as usual.

"But," said Aurilly, "some day or other I must see your mistress."

"Doubtless," said Remy; "but that will be when she likes, and not when you like."

"But if I employ force."

"Try," said Remy, while a lightning glance, which he could not repress, shot from his eyes.

Aurilly tried to laugh. "What a fool I am!" said he; "what does it matter to me who she is? She is the same person whom the duke saw."

"Certainly."

"And whom he told me to bring to Chateau-Thierry."

"Yes."

"Well! that is all that is necessary. It is not I who am in love with her, it is monseigneur; and provided that you do not seek to escape or fly--"

"Do we appear to wish to do so?"

"No."

"And she so little desires to do so, that were you not here we should continue our way to Chateau-Thierry; if the duke wishes to see us, we wish also to see him."

"That is capital," said Aurilly. "Would your mistress like to rest here a little while?" continued he, pointing to a hotel on the road.

"You know," said Remy, "that my mistress never stops but in towns."

"Well, I, who have made no such vow, will stop here a moment; ride on, and I will follow."

Remy rejoined Diana.

"What was he saying?" asked she.

"He expressed his constant desire--"

"To see me?"

"Yes."

Diana smiled.

"He is furious," continued Remy.

"He shall not see me; of that I am determined."

"But once we are at Chateau-Thierry, must he not see your face?"

"What matter, if the discovery come too late? Besides, the duke did not recognize me."

"No, but his follower will. All these mysteries which have so annoyed

Aurilly for eight days had not existed for the prince; they had not excited his curiosity or awakened his souvenirs, while for a week Aurilly has been seeking, imagining, suspecting. Your face will strike on a memory fully awakened, and he will know you at once."

At this moment they were interrupted by Aurilly, who had taken a cross-road and come suddenly upon them, in the hope of surprising some words of their conversation. The sudden silence which followed his arrival proved to him that he was in the way, and he therefore rode behind them.

He instinctively feared something, as Remy had said, but his floating conjectures never for an instant approached the truth. From this moment his plans were fixed, and in order to execute them the better he changed his conduct, and showed himself the most accommodating and joyous companion possible during the rest of the day.

Remy remarked this change not without anxiety.

The next day they started early, and at noon were forced to stop to rest the horses. At two o'clock they set off again, and went on without stopping until four. A great forest, that of La Fere, was visible in the distance; it had the somber and mysterious aspect of our northern forests, so imposing: to southern natures, to whom, beyond all things, heat and sunshine are necessary; but it was nothing to Remy and Diana, who were accustomed to the thick woods of Anjou and Sologne. It might have been about six o'clock in the evening when they entered the forest,

and after half an hour's journey the sun began to go down. A high wind whirled about the leaves and carried them toward a lake, along the shore of which the travelers were journeying. Diana rode in the middle, Aurilly on the right, and Remy on the left. No other human being was visible under the somber arches of the trees.

From the long extent of the road, one might have thought it one of those enchanted forests, under whose shade nothing can live, had it not been for the hoarse howling of the wolves waking up at the approach of night. All at once Diana felt that her saddle, which had been put on by Aurilly, was slipping. She called Remy, who jumped down, and began to tighten the girths. At this moment Aurilly approached Diana, and while she was occupied, cut the strings of silk which fastened her mask. Before she had divined the movement, or had time to put up her hand, Aurilly seized the mask and looked full at her. The eyes of these two people met with a look so terrible, that no one could have said which looked most pale and menacing. Aurilly let the mask and his dagger fall, and clasping his hands, cried, "Heavens and earth! Madame de Monsoreau!"

"It is a name which you shall repeat no more," cried Remy, seizing him by the girdle and dragging him from his horse. Both rolled on the ground together, and Aurilly stretched out his hand to reach his dagger.

"No, Aurilly, no," said Remy, placing his knee on his breast.

"Le Haudoin!" cried Aurilly; "oh, I am a dead man!"

"That is not yet true, but will be in a moment," cried Remy; and drawing his knife, he plunged the whole blade into the throat of the musician.

Diana, with haggard eyes, half turned on her saddle, and leaning on the pommel, shuddering, but pitiless, had not turned her head away from this terrible spectacle. However, when she saw the blood spurt out from the wound, she fell from her horse as though she were dead.

Remy did not occupy himself with her at that terrible moment, but searched Aurilly, took from him the two rouleaux of gold, then tied a stone to the neck of the corpse, and threw it into the lake. He then washed his hands in the water, took in his arms Diana, who was still unconscious, and placed her again on her horse. That of Aurilly, frightened by the howling of the wolves, which began to draw nearer, had fled into the woods.

When Diana recovered herself, she and Remy, without exchanging a single word, continued their route toward Chateau-Thierry.