

him that the company of Desseusart was on duty at the Louvre, and that he might repair at once to his post.

Chapter XXII

The Ballet of La Merlaison



ON the morrow, nothing was talked of in Paris but the ball which the aldermen of the city were to give to the king and queen, and in which their Majesties were to dance the famous La Merlaison—the favourite ballet of the king.

Eight days had been occupied in preparations at the Hôtel de Ville for this important evening. The city carpenters had erected scaffolds upon which the invited ladies were to be placed; the city grocer had ornamented the chambers with two hundred *flambeaux* of white wax, a piece of luxury unheard of at that period; and twenty violins were ordered, and the price for them fixed at double the usual rate, upon condition, said the report, that they should be played all night.

At ten o'clock in the morning the Sieur de la Coste, ensign in the king's Guards, followed by two officers and several archers of that body, came to the city registrar, named Clement, and demanded of him all the keys of the rooms and offices of the hôtel. These keys were given up to him instantly. Each of them had a ticket attached to it, by which it might be recognized; and from that moment the Sieur de la Coste was charged with the care of all the doors and all the avenues.

At eleven o'clock came in his turn Duhallier, captain of the Guards, bringing with him fifty archers, who were distributed immediately through the Hôtel de Ville, at the doors assigned them.

At three o'clock came two companies of the Guards, one French, the other Swiss. The company of French guards was composed of half of M. Duhallier's men and half of M. Desseusart's men.

At six in the evening the guests began to come. As fast as they entered, they were placed in the grand saloon, on the platforms prepared for them.

At nine o'clock Madame la Première Présidente arrived. As next to the queen, she was the most considerable personage of the fête, she was received by the city officials, and placed in a box opposite to that which the queen was to occupy.

At ten o'clock, the king's collation, consisting of preserves and other delicacies, was prepared in the little room on the side of the church of St. Jean, in front of the silver buffet of the city, which was guarded by four archers.

At midnight great cries and loud acclamations were heard. It was the king, who was passing through the streets which led from the Louvre to the Hôtel de Ville, and which were all illuminated with coloured lanterns.

Immediately the aldermen, clothed in their cloth robes and preceded by six sergeants, each holding a *flambeau* in his hand, went to attend upon the king, whom they met on the steps, where the provost of the merchants made him the speech of welcome—a compliment to which his Majesty replied with an apology for coming so late, laying the blame upon the cardinal, who had detained him till eleven o'clock, talking of affairs of state.

His Majesty, in full dress, was accompanied by his royal Highness, M. le Comte de Soissons, by the Grand Prior, by the Duc de Longueville, by the Duc d'Eu, by the Comte d'Harcourt, by the Comte de la Roche-Guyon, by M. de Liancourt, by M. de Baradas, by the Comte de Cramail, and by the Chevalier de Souveray. Everybody noticed that the king looked dull and preoccupied.

A private room had been prepared for the king and another for Monsieur. In each of these closets were placed masquerade dresses. The same had been done for the queen and Madame the President. The nobles and ladies of their Majesties' suites were to dress, two by two, in chambers prepared for the purpose. Before entering his closet the king desired to be informed the moment the cardinal arrived.

Half an hour after the entrance of the king, fresh acclamations were heard; these announced the arrival of the queen. The aldermen did as they had done before, and preceded by their sergeants, advanced to receive their

a sign to follow, went out with him by a door which opened into a yard, led him to the stable, where a saddled horse awaited him, and asked him if he stood in need of anything else.

'I want to know the route I am to follow,' said d'Arragnan.

'Go from hence to Blangy, and from Blangy to Neufchâtel. At Neufchâtel, go to the tavern of the Golden Harrow, give the password to the landlord, and you will find, as you have here, a horse ready saddled.'

'Have I anything to pay?' demanded d'Arragnan.

'Everything is paid,' replied the host, 'and liberally. Begone, and may God guide you!'

'Amen!' cried the young man, and set off at full gallop.

Four hours later he was in Neufchâtel. He strictly followed the instructions he had received. At Neufchâtel, as at St. Valery, he found a horse quite ready and awaiting him. He was about to remove the pistols from the saddle he had quit to the one he was about to fill, but he found the holsters furnished with similar pistols.

'Your address at Paris?'

'Hôtel of the Guards, company of Dessessart.'

'Enough,' replied the questioner.

'Which route must I take?' demanded d'Arragnan, in his turn.

'That of Rouen; but you will leave the city on your right. You must stop at the little village of Eccuis, in which there is but one tavern—the Shield of France. Don't condemn it from appearances; you will find a horse in the stables quite as good as this.'

'The same password?'

'Exactly.'

'Adieu, master!'

'A good journey, gentlemen! Do you want anything?'

D'Arragnan shook his head, and set off at full speed. At Eccuis, the same scene was repeated. He found as provident a host and a fresh horse. He left his address as he had done before, and set off again at the same pace for Pontoise. At Pontoise he changed his horse for the last time, and at nine o'clock galloped into the yard of Tréville's hôtel. He had made nearly sixty leagues in little more than twelve hours.

M. de Tréville received him as if he had seen him that same morning; only, when pressing his hand a little more warmly than usual, he informed

‘In French, *En avant*. It is the password. He will give you a horse all saddled, and will point out to you the road you ought to take. You will find, in the same way, four relays on your route. If you will give at each of these relays your address in Paris, the four horses will follow you thither. You already know two of them, and you appeared to appreciate them like a judge. They were those we rode on; and you may rely upon me for the others not being inferior to them. These horses are equipped for the field. However proud you may be, you will not refuse to accept one of them, and to request your three companions to accept the others—that is, in order to make war against us. Besides, the end justified the means, as you Frenchmen say, does it not?’

‘Yes, my Lord, I accept them,’ said d’Aragnan; ‘and if it please God, we will make a good use of your presents.’

‘Well, now, your hand, young man. Perhaps we shall soon meet on the field of battle; but in the meantime we shall part good friends, I hope.’

‘Yes, my Lord; but with the hope of soon becoming enemies.’

‘Be satisfied; I promise you that.’

‘I depend upon your word, my Lord.’

D’Aragnan bowed to the duke, and made his way as quickly as possible to the riverside. Opposite the Tower of London he found the vessel that had been named to him, delivered his letter to the captain, who after having it examined by the governor of the port made immediate preparations to sail.

Fifty vessels were waiting to set out. Passing alongside one of them, d’Aragnan fancied he perceived on board it the woman of Meung—the same whom the unknown gentleman had called Milady, and whom d’Aragnan had thought so handsome; but thanks to the current of the stream and a fair wind, his vessel passed so quickly that he had little more than a glimpse of her.

The next day about nine o’clock in the morning, he landed at St. Valery. D’Aragnan went instantly in search of the inn, and easily discovered it by the riotous noise which resounded from it. War between England and France was talked of as near and certain, and the jolly sailors were having a carousal.

D’Aragnan made his way through the crowd, advanced toward the host, and pronounced the word ‘Forward!’ The host instantly made him

illustrious guest. The queen entered the great hall; and it was remarked that, like the king, she looked dull and even weary.

At the moment she entered, the curtain of a small gallery which to that time had been closed, was drawn, and the pale face of the cardinal appeared, he being dressed as a Spanish cavalier. His eyes were fixed upon those of the queen, and a smile of terrible joy passed over his lips, the queen did not wear her diamond studs.

The queen remained for a short time to receive the compliments of the city dignitaries and to reply to the salutations of the ladies. All at once the king appeared with the cardinal at one of the doors of the hall. The cardinal was speaking to him in a low voice, and the king was very pale.

The king made his way through the crowd without a mask, and the ribbons of his doublet scarcely tied. He went straight to the queen, and in an altered voice said, ‘Why, madame, have you not thought proper to wear your diamond studs, when you know it would give me so much gratification?’

The queen cast a glance around her, and saw the cardinal behind, with a diabolical smile on his countenance.

‘Sire,’ replied the queen, with a faltering voice, ‘because, in the midst of such a crowd as this, I feared some accident might happen to them.’

‘And you were wrong, madame. If I made you that present it was that you might adorn yourself therewith. I tell you that you were wrong.’

The voice of the king was tremulous with anger. Everybody looked and listened with astonishment, comprehending nothing of what passed.

‘Sire,’ said the queen, ‘I can send for them to the Louvre, where they are, and thus your Majesty’s wishes will be complied with.’

‘Do so, madame, do so, and that at once; for within an hour the ballet will commence.’

The queen bent in token of submission, and followed the ladies who were to conduct her to her room. On his part the king returned to his apartment.

There was a moment of trouble and confusion in the assembly. Everybody had remarked that something had passed between the king and queen; but both of them had spoken so low that everybody, out of respect, withdrew several steps, so that nobody had heard anything. The violins began to sound with all their might, but nobody listened to them.

The king came out first from his room. He was in a most elegant hunting costume; and Monsieur and the other nobles were dressed like him. This was the costume that best became the king. So dressed, he really appeared the first gentleman of his kingdom.

The cardinal drew near to the king, and placed in his hand a small casket. The king opened it, and found in it two diamond studs.

‘What does this mean?’ demanded he of the cardinal.

‘Nothing,’ replied the latter; ‘only, if the queen has the studs, which I very much doubt, count them, sire, and if you only find ten, ask her Majesty who can have stolen from her the two studs that are here.’

The king looked at the cardinal as if to interrogate him; but he had not time to address any question to him—a cry of admiration burst from every mouth. If the king appeared to be the first gentleman of his kingdom, the queen was without doubt the most beautiful woman in France.

It is true that the habit of a huntress became her admirably. She wore a beaver hat with blue feathers, a surcoat of gray-pearl velvet, fastened with diamond clasps, and a petticoat of blue satin, embroidered with silver. On her left shoulder sparkled the diamond studs, on a bow of the same colour as the plumes and the petticoat.

The king trembled with joy and the cardinal with vexation; although, distant as they were from the queen, they could not count the studs. The queen had them. The only question was, had she ten or twelve?

At that moment the violins sounded the signal for the ballet. The king advanced toward Madame the President, with whom he was to dance, and his Highness Monsieur with the queen. They took their places, and the ballet began.

The king danced facing the queen, and every time he passed by her, he devoured with his eyes those studs of which he could not ascertain the number. A cold sweat covered the brow of the cardinal.

The ballet lasted an hour, and had sixteen *entrées*. The ballet ended amid the applause of the whole assemblage, and everyone reconducted his lady to her place; but the king took advantage of the privilege he had of leaving his lady, to advance eagerly toward the queen.

‘I thank you, madame,’ said he, ‘for the deference you have shown to my wishes, but I think you want two of the studs, and I bring them back to you.’

this, if it had not been to make myself agreeable to someone who is my lady, as the queen is yours.’

‘Yes,’ said the duke, smiling, ‘and I even believe that I know that other person; it is—’

‘My Lord, I have not named her!’ interrupted the young man, warmly.

‘That is true,’ said the duke; ‘and it is to this person I am bound to discharge my debt of gratitude.’

‘You have said, my Lord, for truly, at this moment when there is question of war, I confess to you that I see nothing in your Grace but an Englishman, and consequently an enemy whom I should have much greater pleasure in meeting on the field of battle than in the park at Windsor or the corridors of the Louvre—all which, however, will not prevent me from executing to the very point my commission or from laying down my life, if there be need of it, to accomplish it; but I repeat it to your Grace, without your having personally on that account more to thank me for in this second interview than for what I did for you in the first.’

‘We say, “Proud as a Scotsman,”’ murmured the Duke of Buckingham. ‘And we say, “Proud as a Gascon,”’ replied d’Arragnan. ‘The Gascons are the Scots of France.’

D’Arragnan bowed to the duke, and was retiring.

‘Well, are you going away in that manner? Where, and how?’

‘That’s true!’

‘Fore Gad, these Frenchmen have no consideration!’

‘I had forgotten that England was an island, and that you were the king of it.’

‘Go to the riverside, ask for the brig *Sund*, and give this letter to the captain; he will convey you to a little port, where certainly you are not expected, and which is ordinarily only frequented by fishermen.’

‘The name of that port?’

‘St. Valery, but listen. When you have arrived there you will go to a mean tavern, without a name and without a sign—a mere fisherman’s hut. You cannot be mistaken; there is but one.’

‘Afterward?’

‘You will ask for the host, and will repeat to him the word “Forward!”’

‘Which means?’

'A bed, my Lord,' replied d'Aragnan. 'At present, I confess, that is the thing I stand most in need of.'

Buckingham gave d'Aragnan a chamber adjoining his own. He wished to have the young man at hand—not that he at all mistrusted him, but for the sake of having someone to whom he could constantly talk of the queen.

In one hour after, the ordinance was published in London that no vessel bound for France should leave port, not even the packet boat with letters. In the eyes of everybody this was a declaration of war between the two kingdoms.

On the day after the morrow, by eleven o'clock, the two diamond studs were finished, and they were so completely imitated, so perfectly alike, that Buckingham could not tell the new ones from the old ones, and experts in such matters would have been deceived as he was. He immediately called d'Aragnan. 'Here,' said he to him, 'are the diamond studs that you came to bring; and be my witness that I have done all that human power could do.'

'Be satisfied, my Lord, I will tell all that I have seen. But does your Grace mean to give me the studs without the casket?'

'The casket would encumber you. Besides, the casket is the more precious from being all that is left to me. You will say that I keep it.'

'I will perform your commission, word for word, my Lord.'

'And now,' resumed Buckingham, looking earnestly at the young man, 'how shall I ever acquit myself of the debt I owe you?'

D'Aragnan blushed up to the whites of his eyes. He saw that the duke was searching for a means of making him accept something and the idea that the blood of his friends and himself was about to be paid for with English gold was strangely repugnant to him.

'Let us understand each other, my Lord,' replied d'Aragnan, 'and let us make things clear beforehand in order that there may be no mistake. I am in the service of the King and Queen of France, and form part of the company of Monsieur Desessart, who, as well as his brother-in-law, Monsieur de Tréville, is particularly attached to their Majesties. What I have done, then, has been for the queen, and not at all for your Grace. And still further, it is very probable I should not have done anything of

With these words he held out to the queen the two studs the cardinal had given him.

'How, sire?' cried the young queen, affecting surprise, 'you are giving me, then, two more: I shall have fourteen.'

In fact the king counted them, and the twelve studs were all on her Majesty's shoulder.

The king called the cardinal.

'What does this mean, Monsieur Cardinal?' asked the king in a severe tone.

'This means, sire,' replied the cardinal, 'that I was desirous of presenting her Majesty with these two studs, and that not daring to offer them myself, I adopted this means of inducing her to accept them.'

'And I am the more grateful to your Eminence,' replied Anne of Austria, with a smile that proved she was not the dupe of this ingenious gallantry, 'from being certain that these two studs alone have cost you as much as all the others cost his Majesty.'

Then saluting the king and the cardinal, the queen resumed her way to the chamber in which she had dressed, and where she was to take off her costume.

The attention which we have been obliged to give, during the commencement of the chapter, to the illustrious personages we have introduced into it, has diverted us for an instant from him to whom Anne of Austria owed the extraordinary triumph she had obtained over the cardinal; and who, confounded, unknown, lost in the crowd gathered at one of the doors, looked on at this scene, comprehensible only to four persons—the king, the queen, his Eminence, and himself.

The queen had just regained her chamber, and d'Aragnan was about to retire, when he felt his shoulder lightly touched. He turned and saw a young woman, who made him a sign to follow her. The face of this young woman was covered with a black velvet mask; but notwithstanding this precaution, which was in fact taken rather against others than against him, he at once recognized his usual guide, the light and intelligent Mme. Bonacieux.

On the evening before, they had scarcely seen each other for a moment at the apartment of the Swiss guard, Germain, whither d'Aragnan had sent for her. The haste which the young woman was in to convey to the

queen the excellent news of the happy return of her messenger prevented the two lovers from exchanging more than a few words. D'Arragnan therefore followed Mme. Bonacieux moved by a double sentiment—love and curiosity. All the way, and in proportion as the corridors became more deserted, d'Arragnan wished to stop the young woman, seize her and gaze upon her, were it only for a minute; but quick as a bird she glided between his hands, and when he wished to speak to her, her finger placed upon her mouth, with a little imperative gesture full of grace, reminded him that he was under the command of a power which he must blindly obey, and which forbade him even to make the slightest complaint. At length, after winding about for a minute or two, Mme. Bonacieux opened the door of a closet, which was entirely dark, and led d'Arragnan into it. There she made a fresh sign of silence, and opened a second door concealed by tapestry. The opening of this door disclosed a brilliant light, and she disappeared.

D'Arragnan remained for a moment motionless, asking himself where he could be; but soon a ray of light which penetrated through the chamber, together with the warm and perfumed air which reached him from the same aperture, the conversation of two of three ladies in language at once respectful and refined, and the word 'Majesty' several times repeated, indicated clearly that he was in a closet attached to the queen's apartment. The young man waited in comparative darkness and listened.

The queen appeared cheerful and happy, which seemed to astonish the persons who surrounded her and who were accustomed to see her almost always sad and full of care. The queen attributed this joyous feeling to the beauty of the fête, to the pleasure she had experienced in the ballet; and as it is not permissible to contradict a queen, whether she smile or weep, everybody expatiated on the gallantry of the aldermen of the city of Paris.

Although d'Arragnan did not at all know the queen, he soon distinguished her voice from the others, at first by a slightly foreign accent, and next by that tone of domination naturally impressed upon all royal words. He heard her approach and withdraw from the partially open door; and twice or three times he even saw the shadow of a person intercept the light.

At length a hand and an arm, surpassingly beautiful in their form and whiteness, glided through the tapestry. D'Arragnan at once comprehended

'How many days would it require to make two studs exactly like them? You see there are two wanting.'

'Eight days, my Lord.'

'I will give you three thousand pistoles apiece if I can have them by the day after tomorrow.'

'My Lord, they shall be yours.'

'You are a jewel of a man, Mr. O'Reilly; but that is not all. These studs cannot be trusted to anybody; it must be done in the palace.'

'Impossible, my Lord! There is no one but myself can so execute them that one cannot tell the new from the old.'

'Therefore, my dear Mr. O'Reilly, you are my prisoner. And if you wish ever to leave my palace, you cannot; so make the best of it. Name to me such of your workmen as you need, and point out the tools they must bring.'

The goldsmith knew the duke. He knew all objection would be useless, and instantly determined how to act.

'May I be permitted to inform my wife?' said he.

'Oh, you may even see her if you like, my dear Mr. O'Reilly. Your captivity shall be mild, be assured; and as every inconvenience deserves its indemnification, here is, in addition to the price of the studs, an order for a thousand pistoles, to make you forget the annoyance I cause you.'

D'Arragnan could not get over the surprise created in him by this minister, who thus open-handed, sported with men and millions.

As to the goldsmith, he wrote to his wife, sending her the order for the thousand pistoles, and charging her to send him, in exchange, his most skilful apprentice, an assortment of diamonds, of which he gave the names and the weight, and the necessary tools.

Buckingham conducted the goldsmith to the chamber destined for him, and which, at the end of half an hour, was transformed into a workshop. Then he placed a sentinel at each door, with an order to admit nobody upon any pretence but his *valet de chambre*, Patrick. We need not add that the goldsmith, O'Reilly, and his assistant, were prohibited from going out under any pretext. This point, settled, the duke turned to d'Arragnan. 'Now, my young friend,' said he, 'England is all our own. What do you wish for? What do you desire?'

‘But, my Lord, if the Lord Chancellor interrogates me upon the motives which may have led your Grace to adopt such an extraordinary measure, what shall I reply?’

‘That such is my pleasure, and that I answer for my will to no man.’

‘Will that be the answer,’ replied the secretary, smiling, ‘which he must transmit to his Majesty if, by chance, his Majesty should have the curiosity to know why no vessel is to leave any of the ports of Great Britain?’

‘You are right, Mr. Jackson,’ replied Buckingham. ‘He will say, in that case, to the king that I am determined on war, and that this measure is my first act of hostility against France.’

The secretary bowed and retired.

‘We are safe on that side,’ said Buckingham, turning toward d’Arragnan.

‘If the studs are not yet gone to Paris, they will not arrive till after you.’

‘How so?’

‘I have just placed an embargo on all vessels at present in his Majesty’s ports, and without particular permission, not one dare lift an anchor.’

D’Arragnan looked with stupefaction at a man who thus employed the unlimited power with which he was clothed by the confidence of a king in the prosecution of his intrigues. Buckingham saw by the expression of the young man’s face what was passing in his mind, and he smiled.

‘Yes,’ said he, ‘yes, Anne of Austria is my true queen. Upon a word from her, I would betray my country, I would betray my king, I would betray my God. She asked me not to send the Protestants of La Rochelle the assistance I promised them; I have not done so. I broke my word, it is true; but what signifies that? I obeyed my love; and have I not been richly paid for that obedience? It was to that obedience I owe her portrait.’

D’Arragnan was amazed to note by what fragile and unknown threads the destinies of nations and the lives of men are suspended. He was lost in these reflections when the goldsmith entered. He was an Irishman—one of the most skilful of his craft, and who himself confessed that he gained a hundred thousand livres a year by the Duke of Buckingham.

‘Mr. O’Reilly,’ said the duke, leading him into the chapel, ‘look at these diamond studs, and tell me what they are worth apiece.’

The goldsmith cast a glance at the elegant manner in which they were set, calculated, one with another, what the diamonds were worth, and without hesitation said, ‘Fifteen hundred pistoles each, my Lord.’

ded that this was his recompense. He cast himself on his knees, seized the hand, and touched it respectfully with his lips. Then the hand was withdrawn, leaving in his an object which he perceived to be a ring. The door immediately closed, and d’Arragnan found himself again in complete obscurity.

D’Arragnan placed the ring on his finger, and again waited, it was evident that all was not yet over. After the reward of his devotion, that of his love was to come. Besides, although the ballet was danced, the evening had scarcely begun. Supper was to be served at three, and the clock of St. Jean had struck three quarters past two.

The sound of voices diminished by degrees in the adjoining chamber. The company was then heard departing; then the door of the closet in which d’Arragnan was, was opened, and Mme. Bonacieux entered.

‘You at last?’ cried d’Arragnan.

‘Silence!’ said the young woman, placing her hand upon his lips; ‘silence, and go the same way you came!’

‘But where and when shall I see you again?’ cried d’Arragnan.

‘A note which you will find at home will tell you. Begone, begone!’

At these words she opened the door of the corridor, and pushed d’Arragnan out of the room. D’Arragnan obeyed like a child, without the least resistance or objection, which proved that he was really in love.

Then, he began to kiss, one after the other, those dear studs with which he was about to part. All at once he uttered a terrible cry.

‘What is the matter?’ exclaimed d’Artagnan, anxiously; ‘what has happened to you, my Lord?’

‘All is lost!’ cried Buckingham, becoming as pale as a corpse; ‘two of the studs are wanting, there are only ten.’

‘Can you have lost them, my Lord, or do you think they have been stolen?’

‘They have been stolen,’ replied the duke, ‘and it is the cardinal who has dealt this blow. Hold; see! The ribbons which held them have been cut with scissors.’

‘If my Lord suspects they have been stolen, perhaps the person who stole them still has them in his hands.’

‘Wait, wait!’ said the duke. ‘The only time I have worn these studs was at a ball given by the king eight days ago at Windsor. The Comtesse de Winter, with whom I had quarrelled, became reconciled to me at that ball. That reconciliation was nothing but the vengeance of a jealous woman. I have never seen her from that day. The woman is an agent of the cardinal.’

‘He has agents, then, throughout the world?’ cried d’Artagnan.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Buckingham, grating his teeth with rage. ‘Yes, he is a terrible antagonist. But when is this ball to take place?’

‘Monday next.’

‘Monday next! Still five days before us. That’s more time than we want. Patrick!’ cried the duke, opening the door of the chapel, ‘Patrick!’ His confidential valet appeared.

‘My jeweller and my secretary.’

The valet went out with a mute promptitude which showed him accustomed to obey blindly and without reply.

But although the jeweller had been mentioned first, it was the secretary who first made his appearance. This was simply because he lived in the hôtel. He found Buckingham seated at a table in his bedchamber, writing orders with his own hand.

‘Mr. Jackson,’ said he, ‘go instantly to the Lord Chancellor, and tell him that I charge him with the execution of these orders. I wish them to be promulgated immediately.’