

sustain him, let the consequences of this day be what they may."

With a deep inclination of the head, the duke returned his glove to Eugene, who, greatly affected, could scarcely murmur his thanks.

With glaring eyes and scowl of hatred, Barbesieur had listened, while his brother-in-law's repudiation of the tie that bound them to one another had deepened and widened the gashes of his disgrace. With muttered words of revenge, he mounted the horse of one of his grooms, and galloped swiftly out of sight of the detested Pré aux Clercs.

"Gentlemen," resumed the Duke de la Roche Guyon, "I am about to seek an audience with Monsieur Louvois, to relate to him the events that have just transpired; and to exact of him as a man of honor that he will seek no revenge for the affront offered to his son. Which of you, then, will accompany me as witness?"

"All, all," cried the cavaliers, with enthusiasm. "We sustain the Prince of Savoy, and if Minister Louvois injures a hair of his head, he shall be answerable for the deed to every nobleman in France."

"And you, dear Eugene, whither are you going?" asked De Conti, putting his hand on his cousin's shoulder, and contemplating him with looks of affectionate admiration.

"I?" said Eugene, softly. "I shall return home to the hall of my ancestors, there to hang this gauntlet below my mother's portrait. Would that kneeling I could lay it at her feet!"

He was about to turn away, when De Conti remarked, "I wonder whether Barbesieur will have the assurance to attend the court-ball to-night?"

"We shall see," replied Eugene, with a smile.

"We! Why, you surely will not present yourself before the king, until you find out in what way his majesty intends to view your attack upon the favorite son of his favorite minister?"

"I shall go to the ball to ascertain the sentiments of his majesty. You know how I abhor society, and how awkward I am in the presence of the beau monde; but not to attend this

ball would be an act of cowardice. I must overcome my disinclination to such assemblies, and learn my fate to-night."

CHAPTER IV.

LOUVOIS' DAUGHTER.

"ARE you really in earnest, *ma toute belle*?" said Elizabeth-Charlotte of Orleans. "Are you serious when you relinquish your golden hours of untrammelled existence, to become my maid of honor?"

The young girl, who was seated on a tabouret close by, lifted her great black eyes, and for a moment contemplated the large, good-natured features of the duchess; then, smiling as if in satisfaction at the survey, she replied:

"Certainly, if your highness accords me your gracious permission to attach myself to your person."

"And does your father approve? Has the powerful minister of his majesty no objection to have his daughter enter my service?"

"I told him that if he refused I would take the veil," returned the young girl, with quiet decision.

The duchess leaned forward, and contemplated her with interest. "Take the veil!" exclaimed she. "What should such a pretty creature do in a convent? You are not—you cannot be in earnest. Let those transform themselves into nuns who have sins upon their consciences, or sorrow within their hearts: you can have had no greater loss to mourn than the flight of a canary, or the death of a greyhound."

The maiden's eyes glistened with tears. "Your highness, I have lost a mother."

"Oh, how unfeeling of me to have forgotten it!" exclaimed the duchess. "But, in good sooth, this heartless court-life corrupts us all; we are so unaccustomed to genuine feeling, that we forget its existence on earth. Dear child, forgive me; I am thoughtless, but not cruel. Give me your hand and let us be friends."

The girl pressed a fervent kiss upon the hand that was outstretched to meet hers. "Oh!" cried she, feelingly, "my grandmother was right when she told me that you were the best and noblest lady that ever graced the court of France."

"Did your grandmother say that, love?" asked the duchess. "I remember her as one of the most delightful persons I ever met. She was a spirited, intelligent, and pure-minded woman; and many are the pleasant hours we have passed together. I was really grieved when the Marquise de Bonaletta disappeared from court, and went into retirement."

"She left the court for love of my mother, whose marriage was a most unhappy one; and who, although she had much strength of mind, had not enough to cope with the malignity of the enemies that were of her own household."

"Your father was twice married, was he not?"

"Yes, your highness; and, by his first marriage, had a son and a daughter. With the latter, the present Duchess de la Roche Guyon, my mother lived in perfect harmony, but her step-son, Barbesieur, hated her, and finally caused her to quit her husband's house, and take refuge with her mother, the Marchioness de Bonaletta."

"I remember," returned the duchess. "Both ladies left Paris at the same time, and nothing was ever heard of them afterward. They retired to the country, did they not?"

"Yes, your highness. My grandmother had inherited a handsome estate from her husband; and thither they took refuge from the persecution of Barbesieur—my brother, and yet the enemy who, before I had attained my sixth year, had driven me to a state of orphanage, by alienating from me my father's affection. Well—I scarcely missed his protection, for dear mother's love filled up the measure of my heart's cravings for sympathy, and her care supplied every requirement of my mind. But my happiness was short-lived as a dream; my mother's health had been sorely shattered by her many trials, and I was not yet fourteen when it pleased God to take her to Himself."

The duchess listened with tender sympathy. "I see, dear child," said she, "that you are a loving daughter, for two

years have gone by since your misfortune, and yet your eyes are dim with tears."

"Ah, your highness, time has increased, not lessened, my sorrow. The longer the separation, the harder it is to bear, and I know not from what source consolation is to flow. For a time, however, I had the sympathy of my grandmother to soothe my grief. We visited her grave, we spoke of her together. For love of her who was so eager for my improvement, I applied myself heartily to my studies. Hoping, believing that she looked down from heaven upon her child, I strove to prove my love by cultivating to their utmost the powers which God had bestowed upon me."

"And no doubt you have become such a learned little lady, that you will be quite formidable to such triflers as we," said the duchess, with a smile.

"No, indeed, dear lady. I am slightly proficient in music and painting—these are my only accomplishments."

"Ah, you love music? How it delights me to know this, for I, too, am passionately fond of it! When I was a maiden in Heidelberg, I used to roam about the woods, singing in concert with the larks and nightingales; and my deceased father, the Elector Palatine, finally declared that I was no German princess, but a metamorphosed lark, whom he constantly expected to see spread out her wings, and depart for Bird-land. Sometimes, when my reveries are mournful, I could almost wish myself a lark, hovering over the fields that lie at the foot of our dear castle at Heidelberg, or nestling among its towers, wherein I have passed so many joyous hours. Now, if I were a Hindoo, I would look forward with pleasure to the day of my transmigration; for as a lark, I would fly to my dear native home, and sing the old air of which my father was so fond:

"The sky that bends over the Neckar is fair,
And its waters are kissed by the soft summer air'—"

As the duchess attempted to hum this familiar strain, her voice grew faint, and her eyes filled with tears. She dashed them hastily away.

"My dear child," said she, after a pause, "I know not why

your sweet companionship should have brought to mind visions of home and happiness that are long since buried in the grave of the past. I seldom indulge in retrospection, Laura; it unfits me for endurance of the heartless life we lead in Paris. But sometimes, when we are alone, you will let me live over these sunny hours, and—"

Again her voice faltered, and she buried her face in her hands, while Laura looked on with sympathetic tears.

There was a silence of several moments, at the end of which the duchess gave a short sigh, and looked up. Her face was quite composed, and, smiling affectionately upon her young companion, she resumed their conversation.

"And now, dear child, go on with what you were relating to me. My little episode of weakness is ended, and I listen to your artless narration with genuine pleasure. You lived with your grandmother on her estate, and you were tenderly attached to each other?"

"Yes, indeed, I loved my grandmother to adoration. My lonely heart had concentrated all its love upon her who loved me not only for my own, but for my mother's sake; and we were beginning to find happiness in our mutual affection, when death again snatched from me my last stay, my only friend. My dear grandmother would have gone joyfully, but for the sake of the poor child she was leaving behind. When she felt her end approaching, she sent for my father, who obeyed the summons at once. He arrived in time to receive her last injunctions. They had a long private interview, at the end of which I was called in, and formally delivered over to the guardianship of my father, who promised me his love and protection. But my grandmother added these words, which I have carefully treasured in my memory:

"If you should ever need advice or countenance from a woman, go to the Duchess of Orleans. She is a virtuous and benevolent princess, and will befriend you. With her for a protectress, you will be as safe from harm as in the sheltering arms of your own mother."

The duchess extended her hand. "I thank your grandmother, dear child, for her confidence in my benevolence: if I have never deserved it before, I will earn it now; and be as-

sured that in me you will find a loving protectress. But why should you need any influence of mine? Your father is the most powerful subject at court, and the whole world will be at your feet. Young, handsome, and rich, every nobleman in France will be your suitor."

"But I can never marry without love," replied Laura, enthusiastically. "Love alone could reconcile me to the exigencies of married life, and I must choose the man that is to rule over my destiny. Let me be frank, and confess to your highness why I desire to place myself under your protection. My father is trying to force me into a marriage with the Marquis de Strozzi, the Venetian envoy. He is young, handsome, rich, and may perhaps become Doge of Venice. He is all this—but what are his recommendations to me? I do not love him! More than that, he is the friend of Barbesieur, and therefore I dislike him. The match, too, is of Barbesieur's making: he it was that influenced my father to consent to it. I have already declared that, sooner than marry the marquis, I will take the veil. But my vocation is not for the cloister, and therefore I implore your highness's protection. I beseech you, give me the place made vacant by the marriage of your maid of honor, and save me from a life of misery. In my father's house I am solitary and unloved: but even loneliness of heart I could endure, if I were permitted to endure it in peace! But a compulsory marriage is worse to me than death! Save me, dear lady, and I will be the humblest and most obedient of your subjects!"

The duchess smilingly shook her head. "I am afraid," said she, "that the daughter of Louvois will not be permitted to accept the office you ask, my child. Do you know that my maids of honor are paid for their services?"

"Yes, your highness; but I crave permission to serve you without salary. I am rich, and, as regards fortune, independent of my father. On condition that I assume her name, my grandmother left me the whole of her vast estates. I have wealth, then, more than enough to gratify my wildest caprices;—but no mother—no friend. Oh, take pity on me, and befriend a poor orphan!"

"A poor orphan!" laughed the duchess. "A rich heiress,

you mean—a marchioness of fifteen years, who is possessed of sufficient character to dispute the mandates of the powerful minister of the King of France! But your resolute bearing pleases me. You are not the puppet of circumstances, nor is your heart hardened by ambition. It follows whither youthful enthusiasm beckons, and scorns the rein of worldly restraint. I like your spirit, Laura, and I love *you*. You may count upon me, therefore, as far as it lies in my power to serve you. But understand that I am not a favorite at court. The king honors me occasionally with his notice; but the two great magnates, the 'powers that be,' De Montespan, and her rival De Maintenon, both dislike me. They have reason to do so, for I do not love them. I am at heart an honest German woman, and have no taste for gilded corruption. I honor and love my brother-in-law, whom God preserve and bless! But if the Lord would take these two marchionesses to Himself, or send them below, to regions more congenial to their tastes than heaven, I assure you that I would not die of grief at their loss. De Montespan is merely a dissolute woman, who abandoned her husband and children to become the mistress of a king. But that De Maintenon! Her hypocrisy is enough to turn one's stomach. She not only supplants her benefactress in the affections of her lover, but dresses up her sins in the garments of a virtue, and affects piety! She teaches his majesty to sin and pray, and pray and sin, hoping to compound with Heaven for adultery, by sanctimony: perchance expecting, as brokerage for her king's regenerated soul, an earthly reward in the shape of a mantle edged with ermine! When I think of that Iscariot in petticoats, I am ready to burst with indignation!"

The duchess grew so excited that she had to wipe her face with her embroidered handkerchief. After cooling herself for a few moments, she resumed:

"Yes! and to think that the princes of the blood and the queen herself, are obsequious to these two lemons of a king! May I freeze in the cold blast of royal disfavor, before I degrade my rank and womanhood by such servility! And mark this well, little marchioness, if you take service with me. Who goes to court with me, pays no homage to the mistresses

of the king.—But why do you kneel, my child? What means this humility?"

"How otherwise could I give expression to my reverence, my admiration, my love?" exclaimed Laura, her countenance beaming with beautiful enthusiasm. "And how otherwise could I thank my God that so noble, so brave, so incomparable a woman is my protectress! Let me kiss this honored hand that has never been contaminated by the touch of corruption!"

"You are a sweet enthusiast," said Elizabeth-Charlotte, bending down and kissing Laura's brow. "In your eye there beams a light that reveals to me a kindred spirit. Beautiful, young, hopeful though you be (and I am none of these), there is a congeniality of soul between us that leaps over all disparity, and proclaims us to be friends. Come, dear child, to my heart."

With a cry of joy, Laura threw herself into the arms of the duchess, who held her fast, and kissed her o'er and o'er.

"Sweet child," exclaimed she, "your spontaneous love is like a flower springing from the hideous gaps of a grave. I greet it as a gift of God, and it shall reanimate within me happiness and hope. You are but fifteen, Laura, and I am a mature woman of thirty; but my heart is as strong to love as yours; for many years it has pined under clouds of neglect, but the sun of your sympathy has shone upon it, and, warmed by its kindly beams, it will revive and bloom."

"And oh how I shall love you in return!" cried the happy girl. "As a mother whom I trust and revere—as a sister to whom I may confide my girlish secrets—as a guardian angel whose blessing I shall implore. But in the world, and when I bear your train, I will forget that I am aught but the lowliest handmaiden of her royal highness, Elizabeth-Charlotte, Duchess of Orleans."

"And when we are alone and without witnesses, we will speak of those we have loved; and I, alas! of some whom I have not loved; for, Laura, *my* marriage was a compulsory one. The altar on which I pledged my faith was one of sacrifice; and I, the bride, the lamb that was immolated for my country's good. Ah! many tears have I shed since I was Duch-

ess of Orleans ; but your tender hand shall wipe them away, and in your sweet society I shall grow joyous again. We will sing the ditties of my fatherland ; and, provided no one is within hearing, I will teach you our German dances, which, because of the corruption that dwells within their hearts, these French people stigmatize as voluptuous. With such a birdling as you to carol around me, the lark that once dwelt in my heart, will find its voice again, and awake to sing a hymn of thankfulness to God, who has enriched me with the blessing of your love."

"And I, dear lady, will try to deserve the happiness He has vouchsafed to me, by loving all His creatures—even Barbesieur himself."

"Ah! Barbesieur!" echoed the duchess, thoughtfully. "I doubt whether he or your father will consent to give you to me, Laura. Nobody knows better than Monsieur Louvois, how unimportant a personage at court is the Duchess of Orleans."

"He must give me to you or to the cloister," exclaimed Laura, quickly. "And not only relinquish me, which would be no great loss, but my worldly goods, which are an important item in his estimation. I am absolute mistress of my fortune, and nobody but the Chevalier Lankey has a word to say in the matter. As for him—dear old fellow! he is the tenderest guardian that ever pretended to have authority over an heiress ; and he loves me so sincerely, that if I were to come and say that, to save me from misfortune, he must stab me to the heart, he would do my bidding, and forthwith die of grief for the act."

"I can almost believe you, absurd child ; for you are an enchantress, and therefore irresistible."

"Yes—I am irresistible," replied Laura, throwing her arms around the duchess's neck, "and I vow and declare that it is my good pleasure to live forever in the sunshine of your highness's presence ; so I consider myself as accepted and installed."

"With all my heart, if your family be propitious ! And with a view to reconciling them, I must create an office for you of more dignity than that of a mere maid of honor. You

shall be lady of the bedchamber ; and I will announce your appointment with all due formality to the king, the court, and my own household. You retain the title of maid of honor, because that gives you the right to remain constantly attached to my person ; but, except on days of extraordinary ceremony, you shall be dispensed with the duty of following me as train-bearer."

"I shall be dispensed with no such thing!" cried Laura, playfully ; "I do not intend to delegate my duties to anybody ; above all, a duty which to me will be a privilege."

"We shall see, you self-willed girl," was the reply, "for I shall forbid you in presence of my household, and, for decorum's sake, you will be forced to obey. Neither shall you inhabit the third story of the main palace, in common with the other maids of honor ; you shall occupy the pretty pavilion in the garden, and have an independent household as befits your rank and fortune. Now, as regards your table. You know that, by the laws of French etiquette, nobody is permitted to sit at table with the princes or princesses of the blood ; and my lord, the duke, is so stringent in his observance of these laws, that he would faint were he to witness a breach of them. When his royal highness, then, dines with me, you will be served in the pavilion, and are at liberty to invite whom you please to share your repasts ; but happily, I am honored with his presence but twice a week ; and on all other days, we shall breakfast and dine together. The duke spends two days out hunting, and the other three with his mistress, Madame de Rulhières. You look surprised to hear me mention this so coolly. Time was, when I felt humiliated to know that mine were not the only children who kissed my husband, and called him father. The caresses he bestowed upon his mistress, I never grudged. She robbed me of nothing when she accepted them. As the wife of a man whom I did not love, I could aspire to none of the joys of wedded life ; I have contented myself with fulfilling its duties, and so conducting myself that I need never be ashamed to look my dear children in the face. But enough of this : let us return to you. You will keep your own carriage, use your own liveries, and be sole mistress of your house and home, into which the Duchess

of Orleans shall not enter unannounced. You will find it larger than it looks to be. It contains a parlor, sitting and dining rooms, a library opening on the garden ; a bed-room, three chambers for servants, and two anterooms, large enough to accommodate your worshippers while they await admission to your presence. This is all I have to offer my lady of the bedchamber. May I hope that it is agreeable ?”

“Agreeable !” exclaimed Laura, affectionately. “It will place me on a pinnacle of happiness. And now that I have heard of all the favors, the privileges, and the honors that are to accrue to me from my residence in the pavilion, will my gracious mistress deign to instruct me as to the duties I am to perform, in return for her bounty ?”

“Wilful creature, have I not already told you ? On occasions of state you are to be one of my trainbearers ; and when his majesty comes to visit me, you station yourself at my side. Then you are to drive out with me daily, and as you alone will be with me in the carriage, we can have many a pleasant chat, while the maids of honor come behind. And we must be discreet, or they may inform monsieur of the preference which madame has for her lady of the bedchamber ; and then, Heaven knows what the duke might do to us ! Let us hope that he would not poison you, as he did my poor little Italian greyhound, a few weeks ago. He hated the dog because I loved it, and because it was a present to me from my dear brother Carl. So be wary and prudent, Laura : these maids of honor have sharp ears, and it is not safe to talk when they are waiting in the anteroom, for some are in the pay of De Maintenon, and you will not have been here many days before one of them is sold to your father. I can scarcely believe in the reality of my new acquisition, for much as I regret to tell you so, Laura, you cannot enter my service until Monsieur Louvois comes hither to make the request himself. Otherwise, monsieur and Madame de Maintenon would spread it about, that I had forcibly abducted the Marchioness de Bonaletta, and torn her from her loving father’s arms.”

“My father will be here to-day to comply with all the formalities that must precede my installation,” replied Laura. “And, if your highness will admit him, I shall

have the happiness of being in your train at the court-ball to-night.”

“Of course I must admit him, since you will it, my queen of hearts. By what magic is it that you have won my love so completely to-day, Laura ?”

“By the magic touch of my own heart that loves you so well, dear lady—so well, that I ask no other boon of Heaven but that of deserving and returning your affection.”

“Until some lover comes between us, and robs me of my treasure,” said the duchess, with a smile. “Have you seen the brigand yet ? Do you know him ?”

Laura laughed. “He is a myth—I have no faith in his existence,” said she.

“He exists, nevertheless, my child, and will make his appearance before long ; for you are destined to have many suitors.”

“But none that approaches my ideal of manhood. Where shall I find this hero of my dreams ?—not at the court of France, your highness. But—should he ever come out of the clouds, brave, noble, wise, as I have pictured him, then, oh then ! I should follow the destiny of woman ; leaving all other beings, even my gracious mistress herself, to cleave unto him, and merge my soul in his ! Were I to love, the world itself would recede from view, leaving all space filled with the image of the man I loved ! Better he should never come down from the moon—for, if he comes, I am lost !”

CHAPTER V.

THE COURT-BALL.

THE magnificent halls of the Louvre were open to receive the guests of his majesty Louis XIV. Balls were “few and far between” at the French court, and the festivities of the evening were significant, as betokening triumph to De Montespan and mortification to De Maintenon.

For Louis, like Mohammed’s coffin, was suspended between