



THE ROMANCE OF A GRANDE DAME.

BY MARY MATHER.



ANY graceful stories have been fabricated anent *ces belles dames du temps jadis*, which are pleasing enough, perhaps, to be their own excuse; among them the romantic history of Countess d'Egmont, *née* Richelieu, as related by the *soi-disant* Marquise de Créqui. That she was a typical fine lady of her period, with fascinations and frailties in plain evidence, no one can seriously doubt, but since her contemporaries have been good enough to depict her under every imaginable light, we may surely at our distant point of view be permitted to choose

the most becoming.

Place, then, for Madame la Comtesse, *aussi sage que belle et charmante*, in the words of the fairy tale. Mark her air of distinction as she enters—the elegant adjustment of lace and brocade, fan and farthingale, as she sinks low in a *révérence de cérémonie*. Even the polite world of Louis XV. can boast but two others, Marie-Antoinette, Dauphine, and Mdlle. Clairon, Comédienne, fit to compare with our heroine in the stately grace of a courtesy *à la Fontanges*. She is tall and slender, she has eyes blue, grey, black, changing with every mood, and an art in applying her rouge which enhances their magical effect. In her graceful person we discover a charm, a perfect politeness (the inheritance of noble traditions), a piquant originality, an admirable deportment—pride without arrogance, manner without affectation—in short that *beau-ideal* of elegance, the grande dame of the Old *Régime*.

Some lovers of consistency proposed an alliance between Mademoiselle de Richelieu and Comte de Gisors, the Maréchal de Bellisle's son and heir, who was esteemed as the handsomest, bravest, and most amiable young seigneur of his time. Alas! in fairy lore alone are the brave prince and fair princess permitted to marry and live happily ever after. In polite, eighteenth-century real life the Maréchal de Richelieu shook his head gently (any violent commotion would have raised an olympian cloud of hair powder round about): balanced for a moment on a pair of tall red heels, and then—"A thousand thanks!" he cried lightly, "but with your permission, Mesdames, I propose that Mademoiselle my daughter shall look higher than the grandson of Surintendant Fouquet."

"But, Maréchal," it was urged, "these poor children have already fallen in love at first sight—they adore each other."

"*Eh jardi!* I have no intention of shutting up Mdlle. de Richelieu like a black-veiled nun," the old *roué* cheerfully explained, "nor yet of putting out her bright eyes. For the matter of that one always enjoys the privilege of meeting again *dans le monde!*"

Without further waste of words, mademoiselle's fair hand was bestowed in marriage on Casimir-Auguste d'Egmont Pignatelli, first gentleman and richest seigneur of the Low Countries. At the same time, to consummate the sacrifice, Comte de Gisors, under command of his parents, led to the altar a little maiden of fifteen years, whose many

excellent qualities he never learned to appreciate. Nor did he, on the other hand, enjoy that promised privilege of meeting *dans le monde* his unforgotten first love. Not long after the unfortunate young gentleman fell *sur le champ d'honneur*, and one fair image, set in pearls and brilliants, lay shattered over his bleeding heart.

By virtue of her marriage Mdlle. de Richelieu stepped at once into the highest range of European society. Half a dozen pages would not hold the list of titles and marjorats pertaining to that powerful house of Egmont which descended in a straight line from the Sovereign-Dukes of Guelderland, but became extinct in the person of our heroine's husband. Surely no woman's ambition need have aspired to a more splendid position, and with youth and beauty to boot there certainly appeared on the surface little cause for the air of *ennui* and proud melancholy which she assumed with her new honours. That M. le Comte was either handsome or witty no one pretended; quite the contrary, if the truth must be told. He belonged to the mummified order of high-born humanity, a stalking figure, a dry-as-dust individual, silent and ceremonious beyond belief, and many times more devoted to his mouldering pedigree, and researches in the dead languages, than to this young bride lately committed to his keeping, with her romantic fancies, and eyes of fire and dew. But after all is said the species of indifferent husband is not so serious an infliction under a palace roof as between the narrow walls of the domestic *bourgeois* interior; in the grand world, the polite world, the world of professed gallantry where Madame d'Egmont moved, her purblind bookworm was esteemed *tout ce qu'il y a de plus onvenable*.

As every medal has its reverse, so the adulation which followed our heroine did not lack its usual complement. Her aspect of melancholy preoccupation, moreover, often gave offence where least intended; still more the half-disdainful notice she vouchsafed those importunate bores, who, then as now, formed the *pièce de résistance* of good society. When news came up to town of young Gisor's death, all eyes were on the alert—every tongue retailing a fresh version of the old love story, and a certain humpbacked little Prince Abbé, ugly as he was malicious, hurried round to the Hôtel Richelieu with the budget of evil tidings. He stopped long enough to see his proud hostess fall in deathly swoons, then out again on wings of Mercury to disseminate this last curious bit of intelligence. It threatened a serious scandal; so much so, indeed, that the Maréchal himself thought fit to put it in countenance by an ostentatious display of friendship towards the author of the mischief, upon whom he called shortly after in full state paraphernalia. We can imagine the wily old courtier—that stereotyped smile on his thin lips, half mockery, half policy, which contemporary artists have preserved for our benefit, and the jewelled decorations, red, yellow, green, all the colours of the rainbow, flashing over his lace and satin front—we can imagine this magnificent hero of Mahon, and of many women's hearts, set like a small but rich kernel in the midst of his big shell of a coach, which yields the *pas* to no one under blood-royal in Paris streets. Six heavy Norman horses, mottled grey, are plumed and caparisoned in gold and crimson; a velvet hammercloth sweeps the ground; coachman and lackeys in liveries to match dazzle the beholder, while the immense high swung *carrosse* itself is gilded and painted without, and adorned within with mirrors and scentbags, and Montespan loveknots, and a deliciously designed *ciel* of cupids bound among rose-garlands. No amount of dust from lumbering coach-wheels, however, can blind the Argus-eyed world, and Richelieu's little ruse was quickly seen through, though conceded to have been devised in admirable good taste, worthy its skilful perpetrator. Unfortunately rumour was soon busy coupling Madame d'Egmont's name with other love affairs less creditable, and the odium of more than one *galanterie* of common street notoriety found its way to her door. For our part we will turn the deaf ear to these disagreeable insinuations, lending credence instead to a more friendly report, which represents our *grande dame* as both proud and delicate, by nature as well as breeding, little likely to drag her fastidious honour through vulgar intrigues of the kind; and while admitting, in queer French phraseology, her merely "polite" relations with M. d'Egmont, we are assured that after young Gisor's death one grand passion alone, sequel in many ways to the first, served to fill her life. But to narrate our romantic history in detail.

About the year 1760 there dwelt within the walls of Paris, yet far removed from her giddy throng, a venerable nobleman of the ancient house of Lusignan. He occupied an immense and gloomy mansion in the Marais, at least was supposed to occupy it, for no foot ever crossed the threshold, no eye ever beheld this bizarre old gentleman, who existed by hearsay alone. Popular superstition ascribed his strict seclusion to

a *lettre de cachet*, and represented the Hôtel Lusignan as nothing better than a prison-house, where officers of the secret police kept watch and ward under disguise of the family livery. Certain it is that those high in authority preserved a mysterious silence concerning the old Vidame de Poitiers, and curiosity was rife on his account. One day Madame d'Egmont received a letter bearing the Lusignan crest, which was found on opening to contain a polite but pressing request that Madame la Comtesse should favour M. de Poitiers with a visit at her earliest convenience, as he had matters of importance to communicate, and was not himself "transportable." Thus ran this remarkable epistle, written in a faint and trembling hand, like bird-tracks over newly-fallen snow. Unbounded the astonishment, ridicule and laughter it gave rise to at the Hôtel Richelieu. Had this extraordinary old man lost his wits, or was he simply bent on impertinence? Should Madame accept his invitation, if only for the sport of the thing? "*Oh! que non, s'il vous plaît!*" she protested. Not to gratify the curiosity of her best friends would she put herself in the power of any such old wizard.

"Do not fail to keep the appointment," Maréchal de Richelieu gravely counselled his daughter.

Then a little scheme was devised for sending in her stead a prodigiously stout and full-blown *demoiselle* who had lately come up to court, a fishwife in appearance, a scullery-maid by education, yet entitled to thirty-three quarterings on her coach panel, and precedence over most of her betters.

But again M. de Richelieu interposed, with such effect this time that ere nightfall our heroine was on her way to the Hôtel Lusignan. An impression of singular dread filled her mind, as her equipage slowly threaded a labyrinth of dark and narrow alley ways, unknown to her, and equally so, apparently, to her attendants, who often got down to make inquiries or lift the wheels over rut-holes. At last, after traversing a reverberating *cul-de-sac*, horses and coach drew up, and Madame put her head out with something of the sensation of one who views his place of execution. A gloomy *façade* faced the street, unbroken save by a few small, irregular windows, which were barely visible behind their heavy bars and accumulation of dusty cobwebs. Withered leaves, moreover, lay heaped before the *porte-cochère*, and she jumped to the conclusion that the mysterious building was in reality deserted, and the whole affair nothing more than an indiscreet joke. Hardly had the wish given birth to the thought, than doors began to creak, a troop of *valets-de-pied* sprang, so to speak, from the ground, and in another moment a ceremonious gentleman-in-waiting was bowing at the coach door. Nothing could exceed the respectful attention she received at every step, yet it did not escape her notice that her lady's-maid, whom she had signed to follow, got no farther than the threshold, while doors and *portières*, which flew open at her approach, were closed behind with even greater celerity. By an immense effort of will alone she succeeded in keeping her panic under control; the courteous apology addressed to her by the Vidame's major-domo on the part of his master might have been couched in the Chinese state language for all the sense it conveyed. But gradually a new perception dawned through her perturbation—that of wonder and admiration. She found herself transported into such a scene as one reads of in tales of Eastern magic, where Aladdin and his lamp ply their fantastic tricks. The marble vestibule, the stairway of inlaid precious stones, were adorned with statuary and living trees; attendants in rich apparel lined the ante-chamber, bending low on either hand as she passed; beyond, lofty apartments opening one into the other, each more magnificent than the last, led on through marvels of art and luxury to a spacious gallery, or winter-garden, whose spring-like verdure gave rest to eyes dazzled by splendours. Here the foot sank in fresh, green turf, the senses perceived an odour of wild flowers, or caught the tinkle of fairy brooklets rippling between mossy banks: in short, the spot breathed the very quintessence of that sylvan fancy which was all the rage at a time when queens played the part of milkmaids, and candlelight entertainments of live sheep and miniature cascades formed the *délice* of polite society.

The gallery traversed, our heroine climbed a rustic stairway, and stepped out upon a kind of loft, built over a stable some twelve or fifteen feet from the ground, where several fine milch cows were busy at the clover rack. A high dormer window, cut in the thatched roof overhead, gave light to the place, and fell full upon the figure of an old man who lay stretched on a low cot bed in the immediate foreground. His eyes were closed, his hands folded as if in prayer; recalling one of those stiff and angular effigies which are seen on ancient tombstones. To complete the illusion, a narrow

bolster which supported his head brought into relief features noble in outline, but strangely emaciated and colourless as the bleached linen which invested them. Madame d'Egmont did not doubt that she stood in the presence of death. She made a hasty sign of the cross, and her dismay knew no bounds at finding herself suddenly deserted by the gentlemen-in-waiting who had escorted her thus far with much polite ceremony. In another moment, however, a faint movement on the pale lips of the figure, and alarm gave way to lively curiosity. She proceeded to take a minute survey of her surroundings, which were of the most frugal description. A low cot bed, minus curtains, and sparsely covered by coarse homespun linen and blankets, two or three rush-bottomed chairs, a little deal table set out with eating utensils of blue and green earthenware, each article reflecting a scrupulous cleanliness, and finally, by way of ornament, a series of rudely drawn and coloured designs, representing pastoral subjects, tacked against the whitewashed partition, with bits of cardboard at the corners to protect the flimsy paper. This affectation of peasant thrift and simplicity in the midst of Paris and of a splendid palace was diverting, to say the least, and choosing the nearest seat, our heroine prepared to await her host's good pleasure with the best grace possible. She had leisure to study by heart the quaint pictures, the pattern traced on the sanded floor, a black wooden crucifix suspended above the bed. She opened and shut her fan a dozen times, gaped outright, and at last, driven fairly desperate, made bold to raise a discreet little cough. As this produced no impression, the experiment was repeated more and more energetically, until the very cows, chewing their peaceful cud below, began to show symptoms of uneasiness. Through it all the old Vidame lay wrapped in dreamless slumbers; and suddenly coming to an end of her patience, half choked with coughing and smothered laughter, his visitor made a hasty retreat down the stairway, found the major-domo in waiting, and was conducted back to her coach without further delay.

Home again, the story of her adventures created a lively sensation. Certainly it lost nothing in the telling, for Madame la Comtesse possessed a graphic imagination and the most delightful wit in the world. Her father alone sat by in glum silence, his little eyes half closed, small mouth puckered awry—sure signs of gathering displeasure.

"Countess d'Egmont," he broke in gruffly, "it seems to me you have been ill advised in treating a person of M. de Poitier's age and position with so little ceremony. I recommend that you repair this error by returning to the Hôtel Lusignan at your earliest convenience."

"But, *Monsieur mon père*," she expostulated, softening still more her voice always exquisitely modulated, and raising her enchanting eyes, half malicious, half suppliant, "how shall I be able to awaken this singular old gentleman?"

"You can surely address yourself to one of his attendants."

"But why should he wish to see me? What can he possibly have to say?"

"Another visit would doubtless interpret everything to your satisfaction, and I feel assured, madame, that, on second thought, you yourself will be first to perceive the propriety of such a course."

M. le Maréchal rose and took formal leave of the company. His brow was still ruffled, his manner superlatively polite—a lesson in the lofty style of the *grand siècle*. With unnecessary punctiliousness he explained that the sudden indisposition of one of the gentlemen of the bed-chamber compelled his immediate departure for Versailles, where his duties about the King might detain him for several days. No sooner had the door closed than Madame d'Egmont gave way to expressions of lively resentment. She declared this peremptory treatment most unwarranted—*toute-à-fait indigne!* For one thing she was positive she could not keep her gravity again in presence of that ridiculous old Vidame; she would appear before him like an escaped school girl engaged in some silly frolic. Above all the thought of returning to the ill-omened Hôtel Lusignan filled her with mortal dread; its splendid solitude weighed upon her like a tomb. "Any place but that!" she cried, and in her nervous excitement shed warm tears of anger and distress. Thereupon some one proposed that M. d'Egmont should act as mediator in this difference between father and daughter, and on the spur of the moment set out in search of him. It was not difficult to find the learned recluse, who never strayed far from his cherished library, where he laboured day in and out, industrious as the spider, among mouldy apostolic briefs (sealed with red wax) and bulls (sealed with green); spinning out cobweb-like diatribes and reviews of ecumenical councils from that

of Nicée (A.D. 325) downwards. He was not a little taken aback by the abrupt invasion of his privacy—mortified at exposing himself gloveless before a lady, besides feeling excessively annoyed that there should be no suitable chairs in the apartment. Bells were forthwith rung, doors thrown open, a procession formed to the *salle-à-dais*, and there, his guest handed to the place of honour, a modest seat found for himself on the second step of the estrade—*enfin!* M. le Comte was prepared to lend the question in dispute the silent and weighty attention of a Drossard at the Supreme Council of Brabant. All things considered, he cleared his throat and observed gravely that certainly it was greatly to be deplored that Madame la Comtesse d'Egmont should suffer further inconvenience from an affair so distasteful to her inclinations as this proposed visit to the Hôtel Lusignan; wherein he would go so far as to admit he could not, more than Madame herself, conceive either the motive or the utility. Nevertheless it was not advisable that M. le Maréchal-Duc de Richelieu should receive cause for complaint through disregard of his expressed wish and command; and yet extremely difficult, taking into consideration the circumstances of M. le Maréchal's unavoidable absence, of the precarious condition of the aged and infirm Vidame de Poitiers, to see how any satisfactory compromise could be effected in the matter.

Delivered of these reflections, M. d'Egmont bowed his visitor out, and immediately ordering coach and six, set off, post-haste, for the country. It was a clever move on his part, which served as well, perhaps, as any other to mend the breach, for even Madame d'Egmont could not long remain serious in the ludicrous situation, and at the opportune moment M. de Richelieu, who had recovered his natural good humour and good sense overnight, reappeared on the scene, prepared to make the *amende honorable* for his petulance of the eve. Many years before, he confessed to his daughter, the venerable Vidame had rendered him an unprecedented service, in short, not only did the Maréchal owe him life, but honour as well. "Return then," he pursued, gently but urgently, "my old benefactor has doubtless some last bequest or dying recommendation to send me through you, which discretion and delicacy prevent his making me in person. On no account would I allow his slightest wish to pass unheeded by any member of my family."

Madame d'Egmont could not do less than yield to her father's importunity; and taking courage by both hands she set out again for the Hôtel Lusignan. Nothing had changed in that enchanted palace since her former visit. There was the same double file of well-drilled servants, each holding himself erect and gorgeously coloured as a figure on a painted card; the same splendid and silent *salons*; the same verdant garden, where flowers, red, white, and golden, hung motionless in the scented air as if listening for some bold zephyr or bird song to break their spell. The old seigneur reclined as before on his rude couch over the cow-stable (reputed at that period, it should be explained, an infallible cure for pulmonary complaints), but on this occasion appeared in full possession of his faculties, and rose at once with antiquated courtesy to receive his guest. He apologized for the inconvenience he had caused, yet made no particular mention of her former visit, or of his long-standing acquaintance with the Maréchal de Richelieu. Placing a chair by the table he brought out a small casket, and turning the key begged Madame to seat herself and examine its contents at her leisure, while he, evidently much exhausted, lay down again and closed his eyes. She lifted the lid as directed, and found beneath a packet of letters addressed to M. de Poitiers, in the well-known handwriting of her lost lover, Comte de Gisors. They bore testimony to an entire confidence between the young man and his venerable correspondent, and her own name recurred on every page in terms of passionate and hopeless endearment. Frequent reference was also made to a certain unfortunate child, abandoned, it would seem, through the inhumanity of the Maréchal de Bellisle, but recommended with thoughtful solicitude by his son to the Vidame's protection. "My horoscope forewarns me that my days—my very hours—are numbered," he wrote in his last letter dated from the Army of the Rhine. "Alas! happiness and I have parted company; and on the field where others strive for glory, I alone would pluck the cypress bough. My only anxiety concerns the fate of this hapless Séverin, left friendless, forsaken—"

When Madame d'Egmont finally shut the casket, and dried her eyes, the old seigneur, turned towards her. "Madame," he said abruptly, "he whom you regret and weep, was also cherished by me with no common friendship. His secrets were my secrets. In dying he left to my care another self—a youth of nearly his own age, and

closely connected by ties of blood and affection, but reduced through untoward circumstances to a position of unmerited indignity. As the bulk of my fortune passes by entail out of my control at death, it is my desire that this young gentleman should be assisted from the proceeds of my personal property—jewels, furniture, plate and other objects of value, capable of realizing when sold at least, seventy thousand crowns. Strange as it may seem, almost insuperable obstacles stand in the way of my design, the exact nature of which I do not feel at liberty to divulge. Suffice it if Madame la Comtesse consents to accept, in trust for my *protégé* a legacy of twenty thousand pistoles, which I will put down to her name in my testament, to be conveyed afterwards, privately and at her own convenience, into his hands.”

M. de Poitiers further explained that the reputed father of young Séverin, a Chevalier de Guys, captain of the coastguard at Bellisle-en-Mer, had died within the year, and since M. de Gisors no longer lived to plead his brother's cause, the young man had been cruelly slighted, and driven in desperation to enlist as private in the ranks of the Garde-du-Corps. “With your assistance, Madame,” the old Vidame concluded, “I shall at least be able to place him beyond the reach of actual want, and the cold pity of an unnatural parent.”

For a long time Madame d'Egmont hesitated. She foresaw the dangers which beset her path—the need of concealment, of artifice, be it never so innocent. Above all, she apprehended the brutal and suspicious egotism of the Maréchal de Belleisle, then Minister of War, and on whom depended the young soldier's career in spite of their best efforts. When finally she yielded, it was with the understanding that her name and rank should remain strictly *incognito*; and while consenting, at the Vidame's earnest solicitation, to a personal interview with his *protégé*, she stipulated that it should take place in presence of her confessor, curé of St. Jean-en-Grève, either at his presbytery, or in some other suitable locality. Thus prudently hedged about, our *grande dame* doubtless considered her position impregnable, little dreaming of those wayward freaks of chance which were to scatter her laborious precautions like straws before the wind.

Shortly after her visit M. de Poitiers breathed his last, and was gathered to the tomb of his ancestors. About the same time a magnificent catafalque, in memory of the late Queen Marianne, of Portugal, was erected by order of the King in the grand nave of Notre Dame de Paris. Overtures for an alliance between the Prince of Brazil and Madame Adelaide of France were on the *tapis*, and etiquette exacted that Mesdames, daughters of the King, should assist at her late Majesty's obsequies in clouds of crape, and funeral veils, sweeping the ground precisely fourteen yards, by strict Louvre regulation. Madame d'Egmont had also received instructions to attend, for deaf and blind as was her learned spouse to the ordinary course of mundane affairs, he did not by any means overlook those privileges or obligations which concerned his semi-royal state. Promise, then, of an impressive spectacle had attracted crowds to the Cathedral, and many anticipated with interest the arrival of our *grande dame par excellence*, whose beauty and elegance, especially the stately grace of her carriage down the long aisle of Notre Dame, and obeisance before the high altar, made her the mark of popular observation.

On this unlucky day, however, confusion lay in wait for the peerless comtesse. She had got no further than the catafalque in the midst of the church, and was in the act of sweeping her reverence before seeking the reserved seat in the choir to which she was entitled, as well as to a veil thirty-two *pieds-de-roi* in length, when suddenly a face and figure among the soldiers standing on guard caught her attention. In a moment she uttered a stifled cry, fell swooning, and was carried more dead than alive to the sacristy, where a copious sprinkling of holy water restored her scattered senses. We are told, and may readily believe, that ladies of fashion suffered considerable embarrassment in the free play of their tender emotions under the patch and powder *régime*; and but for the accident of court mourning, which discarded their use, our pale and dishevelled heroine might have presented as ridiculously bedaubed an appearance as any naive young bride of the period when taken to witness her first tragedy. As it was, she felt in no mood to assist at the funeral *cortège*, or to share the honour of carrying Madame's veil. She was firmly convinced that she had seen the spectre of young de Gisors, and not until her meeting with the Vidame's *protégé* many months later was this strange hallucination finally dispelled. The interview took place by appointment in an out-of-the-way parish church—a dim and neglected spot unknown to fashion,

wliither our *grande dame* resorted on foot, *sans toilette, sans retinue*, and, worst of all, *sans chaperon* in the shape of her father confessor. At the last moment this good curé of St. Jean discovered some delicate scruples of conscience on the subject of M. de Poitier's bequest, and decided on making a clean breast of it to his spiritual and temporal superior, Monseigneur Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris; receiving thereupon strict injunctions that he should in no wise lend his countenance to an affair which might be construed in civil courts as a manoeuvre for the defrauding of justice. Fortunately, the Vidame's heirs-at-law showed a less suspicious disposition. They caused the sum set down in his testament to be paid without comment or awkward inquiry of any kind; and Madame d'Egmont seized upon the first expedient which offered to acquit herself of her irksome charge, and have done with it.

As the anniversary of St. Louis's Day approached, the Maréchal de Richelieu, who possessed an observing eye, suggested that his daughter should improve the occasion and enliven her spirits, somewhat overcast of late, by going up to pay court, and afterwards take her place at the ceremony of the Grand Couvert. A hint from Richelieu was as good as another's command, and punctually at seven o'clock St. Louis's Day in the morning Madame's travelling *berline* drew up under the *portecochère*, equipped with every requisite for a *toilette au petit pied de campagne*—that is to say, dressing-gown, powder-box, rouge-pot, and lady's-maid. Meanwhile the most worshipful and punctilious Casimir Auguste, Comte d'Egmont-Pignatelli, rose to a point of etiquette. He had been engaged in a searching perusal of his genealogical table, and now begged leave to explain that by virtue of a Condé relationship with the reigning family of Portugal, half mourning for its lately deceased queen was still *de rigueur* in his household. Agreeable to this injunction, Madame swept down in a costume of black *dauphine-lampassée*, richly yet soberly embellished by an embroidery of nasturtium flowers, size and colour of life, amid gold leafage. Her furbelows were of gold lace, her pannier at least four yards in circumference; to crown all, she wore the famous Egmont pearls, the same which Count Lamoral d'Egmont pawned to the Republic of Venice during the Thirty Years' War for a large sum of money. (Where are they now, those precious drops? Alas, *où sont les neiges d'autan?*) Their moon-white splendour was further enhanced by several immense hyacinth stones, burning like imprisoned fires, which served as clasps for necklace and bracelets, and attached to its perch on Madame's curled and powdered coiffure a magnificent aigrette of forty pendulous pearls, each faultless in profile and of the purest orient.

Never had she appeared in greater state or beauty. Albeit complaining of a sleepless night, of *megrin*, of *ennui*, no faintest speck obscured the pearl-like lustre of her loveliness, and languor—if languor it could be called—but added a deeper charm to her enchanting eyes. At Versailles an extraordinary concourse of people had already assembled, culminating almost in a rout about the tables of the Grand Couvert. There was a loud outcry for places, and certain newly-fledged ladies of quality made themselves particularly conspicuous by running hither and thither seeking an opening wherein they might wedge their *bien-heureux tabourets*. It was no such laughing matter—far from it indeed—when *ces dames* d'Estrée and Lamarck (names at which St. Peter himself would do well to drop the golden keys) arrived, rather out of breath, to find themselves ousted by the wives of some insignificant little republican ambassadors, not even accredited from crowned heads! Banish the presumption, and let Messieurs the Ushers of the Chamber look to it that this stupid blunder does not cost every man of them his livery and his pension!

One sensational incident of the kind might have sufficed for ordinary consumption; but a more highly seasoned dish was in reserve for the guests at the King's table. Amid the galaxy of rank and beauty which radiated from the royal person like dazzling rays about a golden sun, none attracted greater admiration than *la belle dame aux hyacinthes*. She occupied a conspicuous position in the outer circle, near the door of public entrance, where a throng of curious sightseers pressed in under conduct of M. l'Exempt and his guard, and after skirting the crescent-shaped tables, passed out on the opposite side. All at once a slight disturbance made itself felt among these good *bourgeois* and peasant-folk, agape with wondering delight. There was a hitch in the orderly procession, and the officer in command hastened forward to expostulate in accents hushed by respect with a tall soldier who stopped the way. Instantly every eye was upon the bold intruder, noteworthy alike for his audacity and admirable good looks. He confronted the magnificent company without any sign of confusion;

on the contrary, his air of proud self-possession would have better become a prince-royal giving audience to his courtiers than the humble soldier of the guards which his uniform indicated. Not a fastidious *talon-rouge* at the King's table but secretly envied the impudent fellow his superb and haughty bearing, his splendid beauty, even his long, shapely hands, and coiffure, negligently studied, *à la Latorirès*.

Standing thus a cynosure for all eyes, the young man himself appeared in no wise conscious of the disturbance he created. His whole attention was concentrated on one fair face alone, yet more in severe and searching scrutiny, it would seem, than simple admiration. *La belle dame aux hyacinthes*, went the whisper from one end of the room to the other. Necks were craned; curiosity rose on tip-toe; one might have heard a pin drop, and in the midst of this dreadful lull, the centre to her dizzy senses of some all-engulfing whirlpool, behold our helpless *grande dame*, counting her heart beats. Useless the delicate *plâtre* of white and carmine which covered her face to mask its changing colour, worse than useless the fan she so far forgot herself as to half unfurl, in direct violation of Versailles etiquette which prohibited the spreading of that article before the Queen's Majesty save as a kind of salver whereon to pass any small object to the royal hand. But who says the time of miracles is past? At the very climax of her torture, King Louis (who had lost nothing of the little drama, the while his supercilious blue eyes remained fixed, to all appearance, in listless self-contemplation), was seen to raise a finger. Perhaps his royal insight had been quickened on this occasion by intelligence acquired through the secret police of Paris, whose duty it was to purvey all sorts of queer information, about all sorts of people, for the gratification of their master's morbid appetite; or perchance that kind heart, which actually worked, we are assured, in the spasmodic fashion peculiar to abortive engineering inventions, moved him for once to an act of charity. Be that as it may, M. l'Exempt received orders to approach, when S.M. observed, slowly and distinctly for all to hear:—"This young man appears bewildered, dazzled, no doubt, by the unaccustomed pageant—by the presence of our Queen—" inclining with an adorable smile towards that long-suffering individual—"let him pass in peace; see that he depart without further inconvenience; thanking our excellent M. de Jouffroy none the less for his exactitude."

Madame d'Egmont drew a deep breath. She even assumed an air of composure, though she could not avoid her father's vexed glance across the table, nor mistake the gratified murmur which rose on every side, signifying that her fair name and fame were just these sweet morsels under every tongue. Meanwhile the august ceremony of the Grand Couvert rolled on its slow majestic course. Etiquette must have her due though the sky falls—as it did fall, that shining, fleur-de-lis besprinkled firmament of old France, and in the darkness and confusion which followed, we all know how this straight-laced autocrat lost her seals, her wax, her red-tape, and her privileged seat beside the three sister fates who spin and clip men's lives.

But that time had not yet come, and our heroine was constrained to face out the long-drawn torture to its last punctilious obeisance. Below stairs in the Vestibule of Mesdames de France her sedan waited among others, beset by a swarm of soldiers, Suisses, lackeys in every gorgeous livery under the sun, which went swaying to and fro like a bed of tulips before a high wind. Her people had cleared a passage, they were already balancing their poles for the start, vociferously disputing precedence right and left, when suddenly, out of the tumult, some one pressed near. An eager hand was on the door, a voice rang in her ear, thrilling with dismay, anger, astonishment, with passionate love and tenderness, "*Vous, vous? c'est bien vous?*"

Ere nightfall all Paris knew the story of Countess d'Egmont's latest love escapade. A handsome young guardsman figured for the nonce in the part of hero—a simple-hearted child of the people, it was specified, and paragon of virtue, ensnared to his perdition by this perfidious aristocrat, who met him *tous les samedis soirs, à la Barrière St. Jacques*, disguised as a little *grisette* of the quarter. In its widening circle the report presently attracted the attention of one whose mysterious animosity was no less stealthy than vindictive, moving in secret ways, as when some hideous octopus first darkens the water, then stretches out long arms to clutch its prey. Hardly had young Séverin de Guys received his dismissal from the Guards with little ceremony and less honour, than a horrible plot for his kidnapping and transportation to Senegal was discovered and evaded by lucky chance. Madame d'Egmont could no longer dissemble her terror; she threw herself upon her father's compassion, soliciting his protection for her friend. "*Foi de gentilhomme!*" the Maréchal protested cheerfully.

"I feel much sympathy for this young gentleman. I had him up the other day to show himself, and as I live never have I set eyes on a prettier youngster—an angel for good looks and modesty, yet handsome and spirited as the very *diable*! Now how would it look to brevet him Lieutenant des Maréchaux?—or Sauvegarde de la Connétable? Upon my word, I fancy the all-powerful, the worshipful Minister of War might find himself a trifle out of his reckoning! After all he is not King of France, nor yet Doyen des Maréchaux; indeed, I may say with due respect, that so long as the King lives, and I live, and a few others, so long our dear *confrère* Bellisle must not flatter himself that he holds all France in the hollow of his hand."

Sympathy for young Séverin was evidently not the only sentiment which animated Richelieu's wily bosom. In fact an atrocious jealousy, an absolutely diabolical hatred had long raged between the two old courtiers, who did not stop in their nefarious warfare at nice distinctions in the use of weapons.

M. de Guys accordingly received his brevet and introduction to polite society under influential patronage. Once seen and known his splendid beauty and a certain fine distinction (like the flavour of wine that needs no bush) proved his best recommendation. Rumours of a romantic origin also served to whet public curiosity; he was run after in the streets, pointed out at the spectacle, imitated in dress and deportment. My lady smiled her sweetest on him at her morning *toilette*—Monseigneur paid him compliments across the supper-table—in short, *le beau inconnu* was the rage of the hour.

Brief as dazzling the transit of this bright particular star, followed by many admiring glances, destined to be swallowed up in appalling darkness. Without sign or warning the young soldier of fortune disappeared one dark night from his lodgings, Rue St. Jacques, and was never heard from again. Audacious abductions were not uncommon at the time, but the circumstances of this outrage created a sensation, even in the *insouciant* world of Paris. There was an unprecedented run on the locksmiths for several days after; doors were kept on the chain, and gentlemen returning late from convivial gatherings hung together as long as possible, or hurried each one to his domicile with eyes over the shoulder. It was the season of equinoxes, we are told, and on the night in question a violent storm shook the old wood and mortar city to its mouldering foundations. We picture to ourselves such a scene as Gustave Doré would have delineated with telling effect. The clouds which scud overhead are heaped pell-mell—huge, gigantic, monstrous shapes of genii escaped from Solomon's hand, and the seal wherewith he sealed them; an ashen-faced moon hangs trembling on the ragged edge of things, and here and there a cluster of hooded windows, a gothic pinnacle, or high fantastic gable looms dark against the midnight sky. But far below sleeps the deep heart of the city. What gulfs of inky blackness! what sinister shadows lurking at street corners, hiding under beetling buildings, lying in wait on the pale margin of light cast by flickering oil lamps! No sound reaches us from this weird region of imagination, but its terror is near; we feel the icy breath of the tempest which howls thousand-tongued through its empty streets; we peer anxiously about, "Every shadow a foe, every foe a death"—shrink shuddering before the coil of gleaming rain water which creeps across the footpath.

On such a night young Séverin de Guys vanished from the haunts of men. Out of his golden prime, the hey-day of youth and happiness, he dropped into utter vacuum, like a meteor that has passed. For a long time Madame d'Egmont would not accept the cruel certainty of his doom. She hoped against hope, buoyed by feverish dreams which consumed while lending a delusive brilliancy to her frail beauty, but fading one by one left her in the end disconsolate, when the bright torch of this enviable young life, to borrow the quaint formula of a bygone generation, was finally extinguished in quenchless tears. During her last illness the two brothers—so like and yet unlike, the elder rich, titled, laurel-crowned, the other a nameless child, born to dishonour and misfortune—were never absent from her thoughts; their names the last breathed by her dying lips, but so confused that it was evident the two had lost their distinct identity, and lived as one in her single-hearted devotion.