

Chapter 35

WHAT PASSED BETWEEN M. DE MONSOREAU AND THE DUKE.

It is time to explain the duke's sudden change of intention with regard to M. de Monsoreau. When he first received him, it was with dispositions entirely favorable to Bussy's wishes.

"Your highness sent for me?" said Monsoreau.

"You have nothing to fear, you who have served me so well, and are so much attached to me. Often you have told me of the plots against me, have aided my enterprises forgetting your own interests, and exposing your life."

"Your highness----"

"Even lately, in this last unlucky adventure----"

"What adventure, monseigneur?"

"This carrying off of Mademoiselle de Méridor--poor young creature!"

"Alas!" murmured Monsoreau.

"You pity her, do you not?" said the duke.

"Does not your highness?"

"I! you know how I have regretted this fatal caprice. And, indeed, it required all my friendship for you, and the remembrance of all your good services, to make me forget that without you I should not have carried off this young girl."

Monsoreau felt the blow. "Monseigneur," said he, "your natural goodness leads you to exaggerate, you no more caused the death of this young girl than I did."

"How so?"

"You did not intend to use violence to Mademoiselle de Méridor."

"Certainly not."

"Then the intention absolves you; it is a misfortune, nothing more."

"And besides," said the duke, looking at him, "death has buried all in eternal silence."

The tone of his voice and his look struck Monsoreau. "Monseigneur," said he, after a moment's pause, "shall I speak frankly to you?"

"Why should you hesitate?" said the prince, with astonishment mingled with hauteur.

"Indeed, I do not know, but your highness has not thought fit to be frank with me."

"Really!" cried the duke, with an angry laugh.

"Monseigneur, I know what your highness meant to say to me."

"Speak, then."

"Your highness wished to make me understand that perhaps Mademoiselle de Méridor was not dead, and that therefore those who believed themselves her murderers might be free from remorse."

"Oh, monsieur, you have taken your time before making this consoling reflection to me. You are a faithful servant, on my word; you saw me sad and afflicted, you heard me speak of the wretched dreams I had since the death of this woman, and you let me live thus, when even a doubt might have spared me so much suffering. How must I consider this conduct, monsieur?"

"Monseigneur, is your highness accusing me?"

"Traitor!" cried the duke, "you have deceived me; you have taken from me this woman whom I loved----"

Monsoreau turned pale, but did not lose his proud, calm look. "It is true," said he.

"True, knave!"

"Please to speak lower, monseigneur; your highness forgets, that you speak to a gentleman and an old servant."

The duke laughed.

"My excuse is," continued he, "that I loved Mademoiselle de Méridor ardently."

"I, also," replied François, with dignity.

"It is true, monseigneur; but she did not love you."

"And she loved you?"

"Perhaps."

"You lie! you know you lie! You used force as I did; only I, the master, failed, while you, the servant, succeeded by treason."

"Monseigneur, I loved her."

"What do I care?"

"Monseigneur, take care. I loved her, and I am not a servant. My wife is mine, and no one can take her from me, not even the king. I wished to have her, and I took her."

"You took her! Well! you shall give her up."

"You are wrong, monseigneur. And do not call," continue he, stopping him, "for if you call once--if you do me a public injury----"

"You shall give up this woman."

"Give her up! she is my wife before God----"

"If she is your wife before God, you shall give her up before men. I know all, and I will break this marriage, I tell you. To-morrow, Mademoiselle de Méridor shall be restored to her father; you shall set off into the exile I impose on you; you shall have sold your place; these are my conditions, and take care, or I will break you as I break this glass." And he threw down violently a crystal cup.

"I will not give up my wife, I will not give up my place, and I will remain in France," replied Monsoreau.

"You will not?"

"No, I will ask my pardon of the King of France--of the king anointed at the Abbey of St. Geneviève; and this new sovereign will not, I am sure, refuse the first request proffered to him." François grew deadly pale, and nearly fell.

"Well, well," stammered he, "this request, speak lower--I listen."

"I will speak humbly, as becomes the servant of your highness. A fatal love was the cause of all. Love is the most imperious of the passions. To make me forget that your highness had cast your eyes on Diana, I must have been no longer master of myself."

"It was a treason."

"Do not overwhelm me, monseigneur; I saw you rich, young and happy, the first Christian prince in the world. For you are so, and between you and supreme rank there is now only a shadow easy to dispel. I saw all the splendor of your future, and, comparing your proud position with my humble one, I said, 'Leave to the prince his brilliant prospects and splendid projects, scarcely will he miss the pearl that I steal from his royal crown.'"

"Comte! comte!"

"You pardon me, monseigneur, do you not?"

At this moment the duke raised his eyes, and saw Bussy's portrait on the wall. It seemed to exhort him to courage, and he said, "No, I cannot pardon you; it is not for myself that I hold out, it is because a father in mourning--a father unworthily deceived--cries out for his daughter; because a woman, forced to marry you, cries for vengeance against you; because, in a word, the first duty of a prince is justice."

"Monseigneur, if justice be a duty, gratitude is not less so; and a king should never forget those to whom he owes his crown. Now, monseigneur, you owe your crown to me."

"Monsoreau!" cried the duke, in terror.

"But I cling to those only who cling to me."

"I cannot--you are a gentleman, you know I cannot approve of what you have done. My dear count, this one more sacrifice; I will recompense you for it; I will give you all you ask."

"Then your highness loves her still!" cried Monsoreau, pale with jealousy.

"No, I swear I do not."

"Then, why should I? I am a gentleman; who can enter into the secrets of my private life?"

"But she does not love you."

"What matter?"

"Do this for me, Monsoreau."

"I cannot."

"Then----" commenced the duke, who was terribly perplexed.

"Reflect, sire."

"You will denounce me?"

"To the king dethroned for you, yes; for if my new king destroyed my honor and happiness, I would return to the old."

"It is infamous."

"True, sire; but I love enough to be infamous."

"It is cowardly."

"Yes, your majesty, but I love enough to be cowardly. Come, monseigneur, do something for the man who has served you so well."

"What do you want?"

"That you should pardon me."

"I will."

"That you should reconcile me with M. de Méridor."

"I will try."

"That you will sign my marriage contract with Mademoiselle de Méridor."

"Yes," said the prince, in a hoarse voice.

"And that you shall honor my wife with a smile when I shall present her to his majesty."

"Yes; is that all?"

"All, monseigneur."

"You have my word."

"And you shall keep the throne to which I have raised you.--There remains now, only," thought Monsoreau, "to find out who told the duke."