

## Chapter 10

### Madame and De Guiche.

It will not be forgotten how Comte de Guiche left the queen-mother's apartments on the day when Louis XIV. presented La Valliere with the beautiful bracelets he had won in the lottery. The comte walked to and fro for some time outside the palace, in the greatest distress, from a thousand suspicions and anxieties with which his mind was beset. Presently he stopped and waited on the terrace opposite the grove of trees, watching for Madame's departure. More than half an hour passed away; and as he was at that moment quite alone, the comte could hardly have had any very diverting ideas at his command. He drew his tables from his pocket, and, after hesitating over and over again, determined to write these words: - "Madame, I implore you to grant me one moment's conversation. Do not be alarmed at this request, which contains nothing in any way opposed to the profound respect with which I subscribe myself, etc., etc." He had signed and folded this singular love-letter, when he suddenly observed several ladies leaving the chateau, and afterwards several courtiers too; in fact, almost every one that formed the queen's circle. He saw La Valliere herself, then Montalais talking with Malicorne; he watched the departure of the very last of the numerous guests that had a short time before thronged the queen-mother's cabinet.

Madame herself had not yet passed; she would be obliged, however, to cross the courtyard in order to enter her own apartments; and, from the

terrace where he was standing, De Guiche could see all that was going on in the courtyard. At last he saw Madame leave, attended by a couple of pages, who were carrying torches before her. She was walking very quickly; as soon as she reached the door, she said:

"Let some one go and look for De Guiche: he has to render an account of a mission he had to discharge for me; if he should be disengaged, request him to be good enough to come to my apartment."

De Guiche remained silent, hidden in the shade; but as soon as Madame had withdrawn, he darted from the terrace down the steps and assumed a most indifferent air, so that the pages who were hurrying towards his rooms might meet him.

"Ah! it is Madame, then, who is seeking me!" he said to himself, quite overcome; and he crushed in his hand the now worse than useless letter.

"M. le comte," said one of the pages, approaching him, "we are indeed most fortunate in meeting you."

"Why so, messieurs?"

"A command from Madame."

"From Madame!" said De Guiche, looking surprised.

"Yes, M. le comte, her royal highness has been asking for you; she expects to hear, she told us, the result of a commission you had to execute for her. Are you at liberty?"

"I am quite at her royal highness's orders."

"Will you have the goodness to follow us, then?"

When De Guiche entered the princess's apartments, he found her pale and agitated. Montalais was standing at the door, evidently uneasy about what was passing in her mistress's mind. De Guiche appeared.

"Ah! is that you, Monsieur de Guiche?" said Madame; "come in, I beg. Mademoiselle de Montalais, I do not require your attendance any longer."

Montalais, more puzzled than ever, courtesied and withdrew. De Guiche and the princess were left alone. The comte had every advantage in his favor; it was Madame who had summoned him to a rendezvous. But how was

it possible for the comte to make use of this advantage? Madame was so whimsical, and her disposition so changeable. She soon allowed this to be perceived, for, suddenly, opening the conversation, she said: "Well! have you nothing to say to me?"

He imagined she must have guessed his thoughts; he fancied (for those who

are in love are thus constituted, being as credulous and blind as poets or prophets), he fancied she knew how ardent was his desire to see her, and also the subject uppermost in his mind.

"Yes, Madame," he said, "and I think it very singular."

"The affair of the bracelets," she exclaimed, eagerly, "you mean that, I suppose?"

"Yes, Madame."

"And you think the king is in love; do you not?"

Guiche looked at her for some time; her eyes sank under his gaze, which seemed to read her very heart.

"I think," he said, "that the king may possibly have had an idea of annoying some one; were it not for that, the king would hardly show himself so earnest in his attentions as he is; he would not run the risk of compromising, from mere thoughtlessness of disposition, a young girl against whom no one has been hitherto able to say a word."

"Indeed! the bold, shameless girl," said the princess, haughtily.

"I can positively assure your royal highness," said De Guiche, with a firmness marked by great respect, "that Mademoiselle de la Valliere is

beloved by a man who merits every respect, for he is a brave and honorable gentleman."

"Bragelonne?"

"My friend; yes, Madame."

"Well, and though he is your friend, what does that matter to the king?"

"The king knows that Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Valliere; and as Raoul has served the king most valiantly, the king will not inflict an irreparable injury upon him."

Madame began to laugh in a manner that produced a sinister impression upon De Guiche.

"I repeat, Madame, I do not believe the king is in love with Mademoiselle de la Valliere; and the proof that I do not believe it is, that I was about to ask you whose *\_amour propre\_* it is likely the king is desirous of wounding? You, who are well acquainted with the whole court, can perhaps assist me in ascertaining that; and assuredly, with greater certainty, since it is everywhere said that your royal highness is on very friendly terms with the king."

Madame bit her lips, and, unable to assign any good and sufficient reasons, changed the conversation. "Prove to me," she said, fixing on

him one of those looks in which the whole soul seems to pass into the eyes, "prove to me, I say, that you intended to interrogate me at the very moment I sent for you."

De Guiche gravely drew from his pocket the now crumpled note that he had written, and showed it to her.

"Sympathy," she said.

"Yes," said the comte, with an indescribable tenderness of tone, "sympathy. I have explained to you how and why I sought you; you, however, have yet to tell me, Madame, why you sent for me."

"True," replied the princess. She hesitated, and then suddenly exclaimed, "Those bracelets will drive me mad."

"You expected the king would offer them to you," replied De Guiche.

"Why not?"

"But before you, Madame, before you, his sister-in-law, was there not the queen herself to whom the king should have offered them?"

"Before La Valliere," cried the princess, wounded to the quick, "could he not have presented them to me? Was there not the whole court, indeed, to choose from?"

"I assure you, Madame," said the comte, respectfully, "that if any one heard you speak in this manner, if any one were to see how red your eyes are, and, Heaven forgive me, to see, too, that tear trembling on your eyelids, it would be said that your royal highness was jealous."

"Jealous!" said the princess, haughtily, "jealous of La Valliere!"

She expected to see De Guiche yield beneath her scornful gesture and her proud tone; but he simply and boldly replied, "Jealous of La Valliere; yes, Madame."

"Am I to suppose, monsieur," she stammered out, "that your object is to insult me?"

"It is not possible, Madame," replied the comte, slightly agitated, but resolved to master that fiery nature.

"Leave the room!" said the princess, thoroughly exasperated, De Guiche's coolness and silent respect having made her completely lose her temper.

De Guiche fell back a step, bowed slowly, but with great respect, drew himself up, looking as white as his lace cuffs, and, in a voice slightly trembling, said, "It was hardly worth while to have hurried here to be subjected to this unmerited disgrace." And he turned away with hasty steps.

He had scarcely gone half a dozen paces when Madame darted like a tigress after him, seized him by the cuff, and making him turn round again, said, trembling with passion as she did so, "The respect you pretend to have is more insulting than the insult itself. Insult me, if you please, but at least speak."

"Madame," said the comte, gently, as he drew his sword, "thrust this blade into my heart, rather than kill me by degrees."

At the look he fixed upon her, - a look full of love, resolution, and despair, even, - she knew how readily the comte, so outwardly calm in appearance, would pass his sword through his own breast if she added another word. She tore the blade from his hands, and, pressing his arm with a feverish impatience, which might pass for tenderness, said, "Do not be too hard upon me, comte. You see how I am suffering, and yet you have no pity for me."

Tears, the cries of this strange attack, stifled her voice. As soon as De Guiche saw her weep, he took her in his arms and carried her to an armchair; in another moment she would have been suffocated.

"Oh, why," he murmured, as he knelt by her side, "why do you conceal your troubles from me? Do you love any one - tell me? It would kill me, I know, but not until I should have comforted, consoled, and served you even."

"And do you love me to that extent?" she replied, completely conquered.

"I do indeed love you to that extent, Madame."

She placed both her hands in his. "My heart is indeed another's," she murmured in so low a tone that her voice could hardly be heard; but he heard it, and said, "Is it the king you love?"

She gently shook her head, and her smile was like a clear bright streak in the clouds, through which after the tempest has passed one almost fancies Paradise is opening. "But," she added, "there are other passions in a high-born heart. Love is poetry; but the real life of the heart is pride. Comte, I was born on a throne, I am proud and jealous of my rank. Why does the king gather such unworthy objects round him?"

"Once more, I repeat," said the comte, "you are acting unjustly towards that poor girl, who will one day be my friend's wife."

"Are you simple enough to believe that, comte?"

"If I did not believe it," he said, turning very pale, "Bragelonne should be informed of it to-morrow; indeed he should, if I thought that poor La Valliere had forgotten the vows she had exchanged with Raoul. But no, it would be cowardly to betray a woman's secret; it would be criminal to disturb a friend's peace of mind."

"You think, then," said the princess, with a wild burst of laughter,  
"that ignorance is happiness?"

"I believe it," he replied.

"Prove it to me, then," she said, hurriedly.

"It is easily done, Madame. It is reported through the whole court that  
the king loves you, and that you return his affection."

"Well?" she said, breathing with difficulty.

"Well; admit for a moment that Raoul, my friend, had come and said to me,  
'Yes, the king loves Madame, and has made an impression upon her heart,'  
I possibly should have slain Raoul."

"It would have been necessary," said the princess, with the obstinacy of  
a woman who feels herself not easily overcome, "for M. de Bragelonne to  
have had proofs before he ventured to speak to you in that manner."

"Such, however, is the case," replied De Guiche, with a deep sigh, "that,  
not having been warned, I have never examined into the matter seriously;  
and I now find that my ignorance has saved my life."

"So, then, you drive selfishness and coldness to that extent," said

Madame, "that you would let this unhappy young man continue to love La Valliere?"

"I would, until La Valliere's guilt were revealed."

"But the bracelets?"

"Well, Madame, since you yourself expected to receive them from the king, what can I possibly say?"

The argument was a telling one, and the princess was overwhelmed by it, and from that moment her defeat was assured. But as her heart and mind were instinct with noble and generous feelings, she understood De Guiche's extreme delicacy. She saw that in his heart he really suspected that the king was in love with La Valliere, and that he did not wish to resort to the common expedient of ruining a rival in the mind of a woman, by giving the latter the assurance and certainty that this rival's affections were transferred to another woman. She guessed that his suspicions of La Valliere were aroused, and that, in order to leave himself time for his convictions to undergo a change, so as not to ruin Louise utterly, he was determined to pursue a certain straightforward line of conduct. She could read so much real greatness of character, and such true generosity of disposition in her lover, that her heart really warmed with affection towards him, whose passion for her was so pure and delicate. Despite his fear of incurring her displeasure, De Guiche, by retaining his position as a man of proud independence of feeling and deep

devotion, became almost a hero in her estimation, and reduced her to the state of a jealous and little-minded woman. She loved him for this so tenderly, that she could not refuse to give him a proof of her affection.

"See how many words we have wasted," she said, taking his hand, "suspicions, anxieties, mistrust, sufferings - I think we have enumerated all those words."

"Alas! Madame, yes."

"Efface them from your heart as I drive them from mine. Whether La Valliere does or does not love the king, and whether the king does or does not love La Valliere - from this moment you and I will draw a distinction in the two characters I have to perform. You open your eyes so wide that I am sure you hardly understand me."

"You are so impetuous, Madame, that I always tremble at the fear of displeasing you."

"And see how he trembles now, poor fellow," she said, with the most charming playfulness of manner. "Yes, monsieur, I have two characters to perform. I am the sister of the king, the sister-in-law of the king's wife. In this character ought I not to take an interest in these domestic intrigues? Come, tell me what you think?"

"As little as possible, Madame."

"Agreed, monsieur; but it is a question of dignity; and then, you know, I am the wife of the king's brother." De Guiche sighed. "A circumstance," she added, with an expression of great tenderness, "which will remind you that I am always to be treated with the profoundest respect." De Guiche fell at her feet, which he kissed, with the religious fervor of a worshipper. "And I begin to think that, really and truly, I have another character to perform. I was almost forgetting it."

"Name it, oh! name it," said De Guiche.

"I am a woman," she said, in a voice lower than ever, "and I love." He rose, she opened her arms, and their lips met. A footstep was heard behind the tapestry, and Mademoiselle de Montalais appeared.

"What do you want?" said Madame.

"M. de Guiche is wanted," replied Montalais, who was just in time to see the agitation of the actors of these four characters; for De Guiche had consistently carried out his part with heroism.