

Chapter 20

Showing the Advantage of Having Two Strings to One's Bow.

Manicamp quitted the king's apartment, delighted at having succeeded so well, when, just as he reached the bottom of the staircase and was passing a doorway, he felt that some one suddenly pulled him by the sleeve. He turned round and recognized Montalais, who was waiting for him in the passage, and who, in a very mysterious manner, with her body bent forward, and in a low tone of voice, said to him, "Follow me, monsieur, and without any delay, if you please."

"Where to, mademoiselle?" inquired Manicamp.

"In the first place, a true knight would not have asked such a question, but would have followed me without requiring any explanation."

"Well, mademoiselle, I am quite ready to conduct myself as a true knight."

"No; it is too late, and you cannot take the credit of it. We are going to Madame's apartment, so come at once."

"Ah, ah!" said Manicamp. "Lead on, then."

And he followed Montalais, who ran before him as light as Galatea.

"This time," said Manicamp, as he followed his guide, "I do not think

that stories about hunting expeditions would be acceptable. We will try, however, and if need be - well, if there should be any occasion for it, we must try something else."

Montalais still ran on.

"How fatiguing it is," thought Manicamp, "to have need of one's head and legs at the same time."

At last, however, they arrived. Madame had just finished undressing, and was in a most elegant *_deshabille_*, but it must be understood that she had changed her dress before she had any idea of being subjected to the emotions now agitating her. She was waiting with the most restless impatience; and Montalais and Manicamp found her standing near the door. At the sound of their approaching footsteps, Madame came forward to meet them.

"Ah!" she said, "at last!"

"Here is M. Manicamp," replied Montalais.

Manicamp bowed with the greatest respect; Madame signed to Montalais to withdraw, and she immediately obeyed. Madame followed her with her eyes, in silence, until the door closed behind her, and then, turning towards Manicamp, said, "What is the matter? - and is it true, as I am told, Monsieur de Manicamp, that some one is lying wounded in the chateau?"

"Yes, Madame, unfortunately so - Monsieur de Guiche."

"Yes, Monsieur de Guiche," repeated the princess. "I had, in fact, heard it rumored, but not confirmed. And so, in truth, it is Monsieur de Guiche who has been thus unfortunate?"

"M. de Guiche himself, Madame."

"Are you aware, M. de Manicamp," said the princess, hastily, "that the king has the strongest antipathy to duels?"

"Perfectly so, Madame; but a duel with a wild beast is not answerable."

"Oh, you will not insult me by supposing that I credit the absurd fable, with what object I cannot tell, respecting M. de Guiche having been wounded by a wild boar. No, no, monsieur; the real truth is known, and, in addition to the inconvenience of his wound, M. de Guiche runs the risk of losing his liberty if not his life."

"Alas! Madame, I am well aware of that, but what is to be done?"

"You have seen the king?"

"Yes, Madame."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him how M. de Guiche went to the chase, and how a wild boar rushed forth out of the Bois-Rochin; how M. de Guiche fired at it, and how, in fact, the furious brute dashed at De Guiche, killed his horse, and grievously wounded himself."

"And the king believed that?"

"Implicitly."

"Oh, you surprise me, Monsieur de Manicamp; you surprise me very much."

And Madame walked up and down the room, casting a searching look from time to time at Manicamp, who remained motionless and impassible in the same place. At last she stopped.

"And yet," she said, "every one here seems unanimous in giving another cause for this wound."

"What cause, Madame?" said Manicamp; "may I be permitted, without indiscretion, to ask your highness?"

"You ask such a question! You, M. de Guiche's intimate friend, his confidant, indeed!"

"Oh, Madame! his intimate friend - yes; confidant - no. De Guiche is a man who can keep his own secrets, who has some of his own certainly, but who never breathes a syllable about them. De Guiche is discretion itself, Madame."

"Very well, then; those secrets which M. de Guiche keeps so scrupulously, I shall have the pleasure of informing you of," said the princess, almost spitefully; "for the king may possibly question you a second time, and if, on the second occasion, you were to repeat the same story to him, he possibly might not be very well satisfied with it."

"But, Madame, I think your highness is mistaken with regard to the king. His majesty was perfectly satisfied with me, I assure you."

"In that case, permit me to assure you, Monsieur de Manicamp, it only proves one thing, which is, that his majesty is very easily satisfied."

"I think your highness is mistaken in arriving at such an opinion; his majesty is well known not to be contented except with very good reason."

"And do you suppose that he will thank you for your officious falsehood, when he will learn to-morrow that M. de Guiche had, on behalf of his friend M. de Bragelonne, a quarrel which ended in a hostile meeting?"

"A quarrel on M. de Bragelonne's account," said Manicamp, with the most innocent expression in the world; "what does your royal highness do me

the honor to tell me?"

"What is there astonishing in that? M. de Guiche is susceptible, irritable, and easily loses his temper."

"On the contrary, Madame, I know M. de Guiche to be very patient, and never susceptible or irritable except upon very good grounds."

"But is not friendship a just ground?" said the princess.

"Oh, certainly, Madame; and particularly for a heart like his."

"Very good; you will not deny, I suppose, that M. de Bragelonne is M. de Guiche's good friend?"

"A great friend."

"Well, then, M. de Guiche has taken M. de Bragelonne's part; and as M. de Bragelonne was absent and could not fight, he fought for him."

Manicamp began to smile, and moved his head and shoulders very slightly, as much as to say, "Oh, if you will positively have it so - "

"But speak, at all events," said the princess, out of patience; "speak!"

"I?"

"Of course; it is quite clear you are not of my opinion, and that you have something to say."

"I have only one thing to say, Madame."

"Name it!"

"That I do not understand a single word of what you have just been telling me."

"What! - you do not understand a single word about M. de Guiche's quarrel with M. de Wardes," exclaimed the princess, almost out of temper.

Manicamp remained silent.

"A quarrel," she continued, "which arose out of a conversation scandalous in its tone and purport, and more or less well founded, respecting the virtue of a certain lady."

"Ah! of a certain lady, - this is quite another thing," said Manicamp.

"You begin to understand, do you not?"

"Your highness will excuse me, but I dare not - "

"You dare not," said Madame, exasperated; "very well, then, wait one moment, I will dare."

"Madame, Madame!" exclaimed Manicamp, as if in great dismay, "be careful of what you are going to say."

"It would seem, monsieur, that, if I happened to be a man, you would challenge me, notwithstanding his majesty's edicts, as Monsieur de Guiche challenged M. de Wardes; and that, too, on account of the virtue of Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Of Mademoiselle de la Valliere!" exclaimed Manicamp, starting backwards, as if that was the very last name he expected to hear pronounced.

"What makes you start in that manner, Monsieur de Manicamp?" said Madame,

ironically; "do you mean to say you would be impertinent enough to suspect that young lady's honor?"

"Madame, in the whole course of this affair there has not been the slightest question of Mademoiselle de la Valliere's honor."

"What! when two men have almost blown each other's brains out on a woman's behalf, do you mean to say she has had nothing to do with the affair, and that her name has not been called in question at all? I did not think you so good a courtier, Monsieur de Manicamp."

"Pray forgive me, Madame," said the young man, "but we are very far from understanding one another. You do me the honor to speak one language while I am speaking altogether another."

"I beg your pardon, but I do not understand your meaning."

"Forgive me, then; but I fancied I understood your highness to remark that De Guiche and De Wardes had fought on Mademoiselle de la Valliere's account?"

"Certainly."

"On account of Mademoiselle de la Valliere, I think you said?" repeated Manicamp.

"I do not say that M. de Guiche personally took an interest in Mademoiselle de la Valliere, but I say that he did so as representing or acting on behalf of another."

"On behalf of another?"

"Come, do not always assume such a bewildered look. Does not every one here know that M. de Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Valliere, and that before he went on the mission with which the king intrusted him, he charged his friend M. de Guiche to watch over that

interesting young lady?"

"There is nothing more for me to say, then. Your highness is well-informed."

"Of everything. I beg you to understand that clearly."

Manicamp began to laugh, which almost exasperated the princess, who was not, as we know, of a very patient disposition.

"Madame," resumed the discreet Manicamp, saluting the princess, "let us bury this affair altogether in forgetfulness, for it will probably never be quite cleared up."

"Oh, as far as that goes there is nothing more to do, and the information is complete. The king will learn that M. de Guiche has taken up the cause of this little adventuress, who gives herself all the airs of a grand lady; he will learn that Monsieur de Bragelonne, having nominated his friend M. de Guiche his guardian-in-ordinary, the latter immediately fastened, as he was required to do, upon the Marquis de Wardes, who ventured to trench upon his privileges. Moreover, you cannot pretend to deny, Monsieur Manicamp - you who know everything so well - that the king on his side casts a longing eye upon this famous treasure, and that he will bear no slight grudge against M. de Guiche for constituting himself its defender. Are you sufficiently well informed now, or do you require anything further? If so, speak, monsieur."

"No, Madame, there is nothing more I wish to know."

"Learn, however - for you ought to know it, Monsieur de Manicamp - learn that his majesty's indignation will be followed by terrible consequences. In princes of a similar temperament to that of his majesty, the passion which jealousy causes sweeps down like a whirlwind."

"Which you will temper, Madame."

"I!" exclaimed the princess, with a gesture of indescribable irony; "I! and by what title, may I ask?"

"Because you detest injustice, Madame."

"And according to your account, then, it would be an injustice to prevent the king arranging his love affairs as he pleases."

"You will intercede, however, in M. de Guiche's favor?"

"You are mad, monsieur," said the princess, in a haughty tone of voice.

"On the contrary, I am in the most perfect possession of my senses; and I repeat, you will defend M. de Guiche before the king."

"Why should I?"

"Because the cause of M. de Guiche is your own, Madame," said Manicamp, with ardor kindling in his eyes.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Madame, that, with respect to the defense which Monsieur de Guiche undertook in M. de Bragelonne's absence, I am surprised that your highness has not detected a pretext in La Valliere's name having been brought forward."

"A pretext? But a pretext for what?" repeated the princess, hesitatingly, for Manicamp's steady look had just revealed something of the truth to her.

"I trust, Madame," said the young man, "I have said sufficient to induce your highness not to overwhelm before his majesty my poor friend, De Guiche, against whom all the malevolence of a party bitterly opposed to your own will now be directed."

"You mean, on the contrary, I suppose, that all those who have no great affection for Mademoiselle de la Valliere, and even, perhaps, a few of those who have some regard for her, will be angry with the comte?"

"Oh, Madame! why will you push your obstinacy to such an extent, and refuse to open your ears and listen to the counsel of one whose devotion

to you is unbounded? Must I expose myself to the risk of your displeasure, - am I really to be called upon to name, contrary to my own wish, the person who was the real cause of this quarrel?"

"The person?" said Madame, blushing.

"Must I," continued Manicamp, "tell you how poor De Guiche became irritated, furious, exasperated beyond all control, at the different rumors now being circulated about this person? Must I, if you persist in this willful blindness, and if respect should continue to prevent me naming her, - must I, I repeat, recall to your recollection the various scenes which Monsieur had with the Duke of Buckingham, and the insinuations which were reported respecting the duke's exile? Must I remind you of the anxious care the comte always took in his efforts to please, to watch, to protect that person for whom alone he lives, - for whom alone he breathes? Well! I will do so; and when I shall have made you recall all the particulars I refer to, you will perhaps understand how it happened that the comte, having lost all control over himself, and having been for some time past almost harassed to death by De Wardes, became, at the first disrespectful expression which the latter pronounced respecting the person in question, inflamed with passion, and panted only for an opportunity of avenging the affront."

The princess concealed her face with her hands. "Monsieur, monsieur!" she exclaimed; "do you know what you are saying, and to whom you are speaking?"

"And so, Madame," pursued Manicamp, as if he had not heard the exclamations of the princess, "nothing will astonish you any longer, - neither the comte's ardor in seeking the quarrel, nor his wonderful address in transferring it to a quarter foreign to your own personal interests. That latter circumstance was, indeed, a marvelous instance of tact and perfect coolness, and if the person in whose behalf the comte so fought and shed his blood does, in reality, owe some gratitude to the poor wounded sufferer, it is not on account of the blood he has shed, or the agony he has suffered, but for the steps he has taken to preserve from comment or reflection an honor which is more precious to him than his own."

"Oh!" cried Madame, as if she had been alone, "is it possible the quarrel was on my account!"

Manicamp felt he could now breathe for a moment - and gallantly had he won the right to do so. Madame, on her side, remained for some time plunged in a painful reverie. Her agitation could be seen by her quick respiration, by her drooping eyelids, by the frequency with which she pressed her hand upon her heart. But, in her, coquetry was not so much a passive quality, as, on the contrary, a fire which sought for fuel to maintain itself, finding anywhere and everywhere what it required.

"If it be as you assert," she said, "the comte will have obliged two persons at the same time; for Monsieur de Bragelonne also owes a deep

debt of gratitude to M. de Guiche - and with far greater reason, indeed, because everywhere, and on every occasion, Mademoiselle de la Valliere will be regarded as having been defended by this generous champion."

Manicamp perceived that there still remained some lingering doubt in the princess's heart. "A truly admirable service, indeed," he said, "is the one he has rendered to Mademoiselle de la Valliere! A truly admirable service to M. de Bragelonne! The duel has created a sensation which, in some respects, casts a dishonorable suspicion upon that young girl; a sensation, indeed, which will embroil her with the vicomte. The consequence is that De Wardes's pistol-bullet has had three results instead of one; it destroys at the same time the honor of a woman, the happiness of a man, and, perhaps, it has wounded to death one of the best gentlemen in France. Oh, Madame! your logic is cold - even calculating; it always condemns - it never absolves."

Manicamp's concluding words scattered to the winds the last doubt which lingered, not in Madame's heart, but in her mind. She was no longer a princess full of scruples, nor a woman with her ever-returning suspicions, but one whose heart has just felt the mortal chill of a wound. "Wounded to death!" she murmured, in a faltering voice, "oh, Monsieur de Manicamp! did you not say, wounded to death?"

Manicamp returned no other answer than a deep sigh.

"And so you said that the comte is dangerously wounded?" continued the

princess.

"Yes, Madame; one of his hands is shattered, and he has a bullet lodged in his breast."

"Gracious heavens!" resumed the princess, with a feverish excitement, "this is horrible! Monsieur de Manicamp! a hand shattered, do you say, and a bullet in his breast? And that coward! that wretch! that assassin, De Wardes, did it!"

Manicamp seemed overcome by a violent emotion. He had, in fact, displayed no little energy in the latter part of his speech. As for Madame, she entirely threw aside all regard for the formal observances of propriety society imposes; for when, with her, passion spoke in accents either of anger or sympathy, nothing could restrain her impulses. Madame approached Manicamp, who had subsided in a chair, as if his grief were a sufficiently powerful excuse for his infraction of the laws of etiquette. "Monsieur," she said, seizing him by the hand, "be frank with me."

Manicamp looked up.

"Is M. de Guiche in danger of death?"

"Doubly so, Madame," he replied; "in the first place on account of the hemorrhage which has taken place, an artery having been injured in the

hand; and next, in consequence of the wound in his breast, which may, the doctor is afraid, at least, have injured some vital part."

"He may die, then?"

"Die, yes, Madame; and without even having had the consolation of knowing that you have been told of his devotion."

"You will tell him."

"I?"

"Yes; are you not his friend?"

"I? oh, no, Madame; I will only tell M. de Guiche - if, indeed, he is still in a condition to hear me - I will only tell him what I have seen; that is, your cruelty to him."

"Oh, monsieur, you will not be guilty of such barbarity!"

"Indeed, Madame, I shall speak the truth, for nature is very energetic in a man of his age. The physicians are clever men, and if, by chance, the poor comte should survive his wound, I should not wish him to die of a wound of the heart, after surviving one of the body." Manicamp rose, and with an expression of profoundest respect, seemed to be desirous of taking leave.

"At least, monsieur," said Madame, stopping him with almost a suppliant air, "you will be kind enough to tell me in what state your wounded friend is, and who is the physician who attends him?"

"As regards the state he is in, Madame, he is seriously ill; his physician is M. Valot, his majesty's private medical attendant. M. Valot is moreover assisted by a professional friend, to whose house M. de Guiche has been carried."

"What! he is not in the chateau?" said Madame.

"Alas, Madame! the poor fellow was so ill, that he could not even be conveyed thither."

"Give me the address, monsieur," said the princess, hurriedly; "I will send to inquire after him."

"Rue du Feurre; a brick-built house, with white outside blinds. The doctor's name is on the door."

"You are returning to your wounded friend, Monsieur de Manicamp?"

"Yes, Madame."

"You will be able, then, to do me a service."

"I am at your highness's orders."

"Do what you intended to do; return to M. de Guiche, send away all those whom you may find there, and have the kindness yourself to go away too."

"Madame - "

"Let us waste no time in useless explanations. Accept the fact as I present it to you; see nothing in it beyond what is really there, and ask nothing further than what I tell you. I am going to send one of my ladies, perhaps two, because it is now getting late; I do not wish them to see you, or rather I do not wish you to see them. These are scruples you can understand - you particularly, Monsieur de Manicamp, who seem capable of divining so much."

"Oh, Madame, perfectly; I can even do better still, - I will precede, or rather walk, in advance of your attendants; it will, at the same time, be the means of showing them the way more accurately, and of protecting them, if occasion arises, though there is no probability of their needing protection."

"And, by this means, then, they would be sure of entering without difficulty, would they not?"

"Certainly, Madame; for as I should be the first to pass, I thus remove

any difficulties that might chance to be in the way."

"Very well. Go, go, Monsieur de Manicamp, and wait at the bottom of the staircase."

"I go at once, Madame."

"Stay."

Manicamp paused.

"When you hear the footsteps of two women descending the stairs, go out, and, without once turning round, take the road which leads to where the poor count is lying."

"But if, by any mischance, two other persons were to descend, and I were to be mistaken?"

"You will hear one of the two clap her hands together softly. Go."

Manicamp turned round, bowed once more, and left the room, his heart overflowing with joy. In fact, he knew very well that the presence of Madame herself would be the best balm to apply to his friend's wounds. A quarter of an hour had hardly elapsed when he heard the sound of a door opened softly, and closed with like precaution. He listened to the light footfalls gliding down the staircase, and then heard the signal agreed

upon. He immediately went out, and, faithful to his promise, bent his way, without once turning his head, through the streets of Fontainebleau, towards the doctor's dwelling.