

Chapter 23

Triumfeminate.

On the king's arrival in Paris, he sat at the council which had been summoned, and worked for a certain portion of the day. The queen remained with the queen-mother, and burst into tears as soon as she had taken leave of the king. "Ah, madame!" she said, "the king no longer loves me! What will become of me?"

"A husband always loves his wife when she is like you," replied Anne of Austria.

"A time may come when he will love another woman instead of me."

"What do you call loving?"

"Always thinking of a person - always seeking her society."

"Do you happen to have remarked," said Anne of Austria, "that the king has ever done anything of the sort?"

"No, madame," said the young queen, hesitatingly.

"What is there to complain of, then, Marie?"

"You will admit that the king leaves me?"

"The king, my daughter, belongs to his people."

"And that is the very reason why he no longer belongs to me; and that is the reason, too, why I shall find myself, as so many queens before me, forsaken and forgotten, whilst glory and honors will be reserved for others. Oh, my mother! the king is so handsome! how often will others tell him that they love him, and how much, indeed, they must do so!"

"It is very seldom, indeed, that women love the man in loving the king. But if such a thing happened, which I doubt, you would do better to wish, Marie, that such women should really love your husband. In the first place, the devoted love of a mistress is a rapid element of the dissolution of a lover's affection; and then, by dint of loving, the mistress loses all influence over her lover, whose power of wealth she does not covet, caring only for his affection. Wish, therefore, that the king should love but lightly, and that his mistress should love with all her heart."

"Oh, my mother, what power may not a deep affection exercise over him!"

"And yet you say you are resigned?"

"Quite true, quite true; I speak absurdly. There is a feeling of anguish, however, which I can never control."

"And that is?"

"The king may make a happy choice - may find a home, with all the tender influences of home, not far from that we can offer him, - a home with children round him, the children of another woman. Oh, madame! I should die if I were but to see the king's children."

"Marie, Marie," replied the queen-mother with a smile, and she took the young queen's hand in her own, "remember what I am going to say, and let it always be a consolation to you: the king cannot have a Dauphin without you."

With this remark the queen-mother quitted her daughter-in-law, in order to meet Madame, whose arrival in the grand cabinet had just been announced by one of the pages. Madame had scarcely taken time to change her dress. Her face revealed her agitation, which betrayed a plan, the execution of which occupied, while the result disturbed, her mind.

"I came to ascertain," she said, "if your majesties are suffering any fatigue from our journey."

"None at all," said the queen-mother.

"A little," replied Maria Theresa.

"I have suffered from annoyance more than anything else," said Madame.

"How was that?" inquired Anne of Austria.

"The fatigue the king undergoes in riding about on horseback."

"That does the king good."

"And it was I who advised him," said Maria Theresa, turning pale.

Madame said not a word in reply; but one of those smiles which were peculiarly her own flitted for a moment across her lips, without passing over the rest of her face; then, immediately changing the conversation, she continued, "We shall find Paris precisely the Paris we quitted; the same intrigues, plots, and flirtations going on."

"Intrigues! What intrigues do you allude to?" inquired the queen-mother.

"People are talking a good deal about M. Fouquet and Madame Plessis-Belliere."

"Who makes up the number to about ten thousand," replied the queen-mother. "But what are the plots you speak of?"

"We have, it seems, certain misunderstandings with Holland to settle."

"What about?"

"Monsieur has been telling me the story of the medals."

"Oh!" exclaimed the young queen, "you mean those medals struck in Holland, on which a cloud is seen passing across the sun, which is the king's device. You are wrong in calling that a plot - it is an insult."

"But so contemptible that the king can well despise it," replied the queen-mother. "Well, what are the flirtations which are alluded to? Do you mean that of Madame d'Olonne?"

"No, no; nearer ourselves than that."

"_Casa de usted_," murmured the queen-mother, and without moving her lips, in her daughter-in-law's ear, without being overheard by Madame, who thus continued: - "You know the terrible news?"

Transcriber's note: "In your house." - JB

"Oh, yes; M. de Guiche's wound."

"And you attribute it, I suppose, as every one else does, to an accident which happened to him while hunting?"

"Yes, of course," said both the queens together, their interest awakened.

Madame drew closer to them, as she said, in a low tone of voice, "It was a duel."

"Ah!" said Anne of Austria, in a severe tone; for, in her ears, the word "duel," which had been forbidden in France all the time she reigned over it, had a strange sound.

"A most deplorable duel, which has nearly cost Monsieur two of his best friends, and the king two of his best servants."

"What was the cause of the duel?" inquired the young queen, animated by a secret instinct.

"Flirtation," repeated Madame, triumphantly. "The gentlemen in question were conversing about the virtue of a particular lady belonging to the court. One of them thought that Pallas was a very second-rate person compared to her; the other pretended that the lady in question was an imitation of Venus alluring Mars; and thereupon the two gentlemen fought as fiercely as Hector and Achilles."

"Venus alluring Mars?" said the young queen in a low tone of voice without venturing to examine into the allegory very deeply.

"Who is the lady?" inquired Anne of Austria abruptly. "You said, I believe, she was one of the ladies of honor?"

"Did I say so?" replied Madame.

"Yes; at least I thought I heard you mention it."

"Are you not aware that such a woman is of ill-omen to a royal house?"

"Is it not Mademoiselle de la Valliere?" said the queen-mother.

"Yes, indeed, that plain-looking creature."

"I thought she was affianced to a gentleman who certainly is not, at least so I have heard, either M. de Guiche or M. de Wardes?"

"Very possibly, madame."

The young queen took up a piece of tapestry, and began to broider with an affectation of tranquillity her trembling fingers contradicted.

"What were you saying about Venus and Mars?" pursued the queen-mother.

"Is there a Mars also?"

"She boasts of that being the case."

"Did you say she boasts of it?"

"That was the cause of the duel."

"And M. de Guiche upheld the cause of Mars?"

"Yes, certainly; like the devoted servant he is."

"The devoted servant of whom?" exclaimed the young queen, forgetting her reserve in allowing her jealous feeling to escape.

"Mars, not to be defended except at the expense of Venus," replied Madame. "M. de Guiche maintained the perfect innocence of Mars, and no doubt affirmed that it was all a mere boast."

"And M. de Wardes," said Anne of Austria, quietly, "spread the report that Venus was within her rights, I suppose?"

"Oh, De Wardes," thought Madame, "you shall pay dearly for the wound you have given that noblest - best of men!" And she began to attack De Wardes with the greatest bitterness; thus discharging her own and De Guiche's debt, with the assurance that she was working the future ruin of her enemy. She said so much, in fact, that had Manicamp been there, he would have regretted he had shown such firm regard for his friend, inasmuch as it resulted in the ruin of his unfortunate foe.

"I see nothing in the whole affair but one cause of mischief, and that is La Valliere herself," said the queen-mother.

The young queen resumed her work with perfect indifference of manner, while Madame listened eagerly.

"I do not yet quite understand what you said just now about the danger of coquetry," resumed Anne of Austria.

"It is quite true," Madame hastened to say, "that if the girl had not been a coquette, Mars would not have thought at all about her."

The repetition of this word Mars brought a passing color to the queen's face; but she still continued her work.

"I will not permit that, in my court, gentlemen should be set against each other in this manner," said Anne of Austria, calmly. "Such manners were useful enough, perhaps, in days when the divided nobility had no other rallying-point than mere gallantry. At that time women, whose sway was absolute and undivided, were privileged to encourage men's valor by frequent trials of their courage. But now, thank Heaven, there is but one master in France, and to him every instinct of the mind, every pulse of the body are due. I will not allow my son to be deprived of any single one of his servants." And she turned towards the young queen, saying, "What is to be done with this La Valliere?"

"La Valliere?" said the queen, apparently surprised, "I do not even know the name;" and she accompanied this remark by one of those cold, fixed smiles only to be observed on royal lips.

Madame was herself a princess great in every respect, great in intelligence, great by birth, by pride; the queen's reply, however, completely astonished her, and she was obliged to pause for a moment in order to recover herself. "She is one of my maids of honor," she replied, with a bow.

"In that case," retorted Maria Theresa, in the same tone, "it is your affair, my sister, and not ours."

"I beg your pardon," resumed Anne of Austria, "it is my affair. And I perfectly well understand," she pursued, addressing a look full of intelligence at Madame, "Madame's motive for saying what she has just said."

"Everything which emanates from you, madame," said the English princess, "proceeds from the lips of Wisdom."

"If we send this girl back to her own family," said Maria Theresa, gently, "we must bestow a pension upon her."

"Which I will provide for out of my income," exclaimed Madame.

"No, no," interrupted Anne of Austria, "no disturbance, I beg. The king dislikes that the slightest disrespectful remark should be made of any lady. Let everything be done quietly. Will you have the kindness,

Madame, to send for this girl here; and you, my daughter, will have the goodness to retire to your own room."

The dowager queen's entreaties were commands, and as Maria Theresa rose to return to her apartments, Madame rose in order to send a page to summon La Valliere.