

## Chapter 24

### The First Quarrel.

La Valliere entered the queen-mother's apartments without in the least suspecting that a serious plot was being concerted against her. She thought it was for something connected with her duties, and never had the queen-mother been unkind to her when such was the case. Besides, not being immediately under the control or direction of Anne of Austria, she could only have an official connection with her, to which her own gentleness of disposition, and the rank of the august princess, made her yield on every occasion with the best possible grace. She therefore advanced towards the queen-mother with that soft and gentle smile which constituted her principal charm, and as she did not approach sufficiently close, Anne of Austria signed to her to come nearer. Madame then entered the room, and with a perfectly calm air took her seat beside her mother-in-law, and continued the work which Maria Theresa had begun. When La Valliere, instead of the direction which she expected to receive immediately on entering the room, perceived these preparations, she looked with curiosity, if not with uneasiness, at the two princesses. Anne seemed full of thought, while Madame maintained an affectation of indifference that would have alarmed a less timid person even than Louise.

"Mademoiselle," said the queen-mother suddenly, without attempting to moderate or disguise her Spanish accent, which she never failed to do except when she was angry, "come closer; we were talking of you, as every one else seems to be doing."

"Of me!" exclaimed La Valliere, turning pale.

"Do you pretend to be ignorant of it; are you not aware of the duel between M. de Guiche and M. de Wardes?"

"Oh, madame! I heard of it yesterday," said La Valliere, clasping her hands together.

"And did you not foresee this quarrel?"

"Why should I, madame?"

"Because two men never fight without a motive, and because you must be aware of the motive which awakened the animosity of the two in question."

"I am perfectly ignorant of it, madame."

"A persevering denial is a very commonplace mode of defense, and you, who have great pretensions to be witty and clever, ought to avoid commonplaces. What else have you to say?"

"Oh! madame, your majesty terrifies me with your cold severity of manner; but I do not understand how I can have incurred your displeasure, or in what respect people concern themselves about me."

"Then I will tell you. M. de Guiche has been obliged to undertake your defense."

"My defense?"

"Yes. He is a gallant knight, and beautiful adventuresses like to see brave knights couch lances in their honor. But, for my part, I hate fields of battle, and above all I hate adventures, and - take my remark as you please."

La Valliere sank at the queen's feet, who turned her back upon her. She stretched out her hands towards Madame, who laughed in her face. A feeling of pride made her rise to her feet.

"I have begged your majesty to tell me what is the crime I am accused of - I can claim this at your hands; and I see I am condemned before I am even permitted to justify myself."

"Eh! indeed," cried Anne of Austria, "listen to her beautiful phrases, Madame, and to her fine sentiments; she is an inexhaustible well of tenderness and heroic expressions. One can easily see, young lady, that you have cultivated your mind in the society of crowned heads."

La Valliere felt struck to the heart; she became, not whiter, but as white as a lily, and all her strength forsook her.

"I wished to inform you," interrupted the queen, disdainfully, "that if you continue to nourish such feelings, you will humiliate us to such a degree that we shall be ashamed of appearing before you. Be simple in your manners. By the by, I am informed that you are affianced; is it the case?"

La Valliere pressed her hand over her heart, which was wrung with a fresh pang.

"Answer when you are spoken to!"

"Yes, madame."

"To a gentleman?"

"Yes, madame."

"His name?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Are you aware that it is an exceedingly fortunate circumstance for you, mademoiselle, that such is the case, and without fortune or position, as you are, or without any very great personal advantages, you ought to bless Heaven for having procured you such a future as seems to be in store for you?"

La Valliere did not reply. "Where is the Vicomte de Bragelonne?" pursued the queen.

"In England," said Madame, "where the report of this young lady's success will not fail to reach him."

"Oh, Heaven!" murmured La Valliere in despair.

"Very well, mademoiselle!" said Anne of Austria, "we will get this young gentleman to return, and send you away somewhere with him. If you are of a different opinion - for girls have strange views and fancies at times - trust to me, I will put you in a proper path again. I have done as much for girls who are not as good as you are, probably."

La Valliere ceased to hear the queen, who pitilessly added: "I will send you somewhere, by yourself, where you will be able to indulge in a little serious reflection. Reflection calms the ardor of the blood, and swallows up the illusions of youth. I suppose you understand what I have been saying?"

"Madame!"

"Not a word?"

"I am innocent of everything your majesty supposes. Oh, madame! you are

a witness of my despair. I love, I respect your majesty so much."

"It would be far better not to respect me at all," said the queen, with a chilling irony of manner. "It would be far better if you were not innocent. Do you presume to suppose that I should be satisfied simply to leave you unpunished if you had committed the fault?"

"Oh, madame! you are killing me."

"No acting, if you please, or I will precipitate the *denouement* of this *play*; leave the room; return to your own apartment, and I trust my lesson may be of service to you."

"Madame!" said La Valliere to the Duchess d'Orleans, whose hands she seized in her own, "do you, who are so good, intercede for me?"

"I!" replied the latter, with an insulting joy, "I - good! - Ah, mademoiselle, you think nothing of the kind;" and with a rude, hasty gesture she repulsed the young girl's grasp.

La Valliere, instead of giving way, as from her extreme pallor and her tears the two princesses possibly expected, suddenly resumed her calm and dignified air; she bowed profoundly, and left the room.

"Well!" said Anne of Austria to Madame, "do you think she will begin again?"

"I always suspect those gentle, patient characters," replied Madame.

"Nothing is more full of courage than a patient heart, nothing more self-reliant than a gentle spirit."

"I feel I may almost venture to assure you she will think twice before she looks at the god Mars again."

"So long as she does not obtain the protection of his buckler I do not care," retorted Madame.

A proud, defiant look of the queen-mother was the reply to this objection, which was by no means deficient in finesse; and both of them, almost sure of their victory, went to look for Maria Theresa, who had been waiting for them with impatience.

It was about half-past six in the evening, and the king had just partaken of refreshment. He lost no time; but the repast finished, and business matters settled, he took Saint-Aignan by the arm, and desired him to lead the way to La Valliere's apartments. The courtier uttered an exclamation.

"Well, what is that for? It is a habit you will have to adopt, and in order to adopt a habit, one must make a beginning."

"Oh, sire!" said Saint-Aignan, "it is hardly possible: for every one can be seen entering or leaving those apartments. If, however, some pretext

or other were made use of - if your majesty, for instance, would wait until Madame were in her own apartments - "

"No pretext; no delays. I have had enough of these impediments and mysteries; I cannot perceive in what respect the king of France dishonors himself by conversing with an amiable and clever girl. Evil be to him who evil thinks."

"Will your majesty forgive an excess of zeal on my part?"

"Speak freely."

"How about the queen?"

"True, true; I always wish the most entire respect to be shown to her majesty. Well, then, this evening only will I pay Mademoiselle de la Valliere a visit, and after to-day I will make use of any pretext you like. To-morrow we will devise all sorts of means; to-night I have no time."

Saint-Aignan made no reply; he descended the steps, preceding the king, and crossed the different courtyards with a feeling of shame, which the distinguished honor of accompanying the king did not remove. The reason was that Saint-Aignan wished to stand well with Madame, as well as with the queens, and also, that he did not, on the other hand, want to displease Mademoiselle de la Valliere: and in order to carry out so many



promising affairs, it was difficult to avoid jostling against some obstacle or other. Besides, the windows of the young queen's rooms, those of the queen-mother's, and of Madame herself, looked out upon the courtyard of the maids of honor. To be seen, therefore, accompanying the king, would be effectually to quarrel with three great and influential princesses - whose authority was unbounded - for the purpose of supporting the ephemeral credit of a mistress. The unhappy Saint-Aignan, who had not displayed a very great amount of courage in taking La Valliere's part in the park of Fontainebleau, did not feel any braver in the broad day-light, and found a thousand defects in the poor girl which he was most eager to communicate to the king. But his trial soon finished, - the courtyards were crossed; not a curtain was drawn aside, nor a window opened. The king walked hastily, because of his impatience, and the long legs of Saint-Aignan, who preceded him. At the door, however, Saint-Aignan wished to retire, but the king desired him to remain; a delicate consideration, on the king's part, which the courtier could very well have dispensed with. He had to follow Louis into La Valliere's apartment. As soon as the king arrived the young girl dried her tears, but so precipitately that the king perceived it. He questioned her most anxiously and tenderly, and pressed her to tell him the cause of her emotion.

"Nothing is the matter, sire," she said.

"And yet you were weeping?"

"Oh, no, indeed, sire."

"Look, Saint-Aignan, and tell me if I am mistaken."

Saint-Aignan ought to have answered, but he was too much embarrassed.

"At all events your eyes are red, mademoiselle," said the king.

"The dust of the road merely, sire."

"No, no; you no longer possess the air of supreme contentment which renders you so beautiful and so attractive. You do not look at me. Why avoid my gaze?" he said, as she turned aside her head. "In Heaven's name, what is the matter?" he inquired, beginning to lose command over himself.

"Nothing at all, sire; and I am perfectly ready to assure your majesty that my mind is as free from anxiety as you could possibly wish."

"Your mind at ease, when I see you are embarrassed at the slightest thing. Has any one annoyed you?"

"No, no, sire."

"I insist upon knowing if such really be the case," said the prince, his eyes sparkling.

"No one, sire, no one has in any way offended me."

"In that case, pray resume your gentle air of gayety, or that sweet melancholy look which I so loved in you this morning; for pity's sake, do so."

"Yes, sire, yes."

The king tapped the floor impatiently with his foot, saying, "Such a change is positively inexplicable." And he looked at Saint-Aignan, who had also remarked La Valliere's peculiar lethargy, as well as the king's impatience.

It was futile for the king to entreat, and as useless for him to try to overcome her depression: the poor girl was completely overwhelmed, - the appearance of an angel would hardly have awakened her from her torpor.

The king saw in her repeated negative replies a mystery full of unkindness; he began to look round the apartment with a suspicious air. There happened to be in La Valliere's room a miniature of Athos. The king remarked that this portrait bore a strong resemblance to Bragelonne, for it had been taken when the count was quite a young man. He looked at it with a threatening air. La Valliere, in her misery far indeed from thinking of this portrait, could not conjecture the cause of the king's preoccupation. And yet the king's mind was occupied with a terrible

remembrance, which had more than once taken possession of his mind, but which he had always driven away. He recalled the intimacy existing between the two young people from their birth, their engagement, and that Athos himself had come to solicit La Valliere's hand for Raoul. He therefore could not but suppose that on her return to Paris, La Valliere had found news from London awaiting her, and that this news had counterbalanced the influence he had been enabled to exert over her. He immediately felt himself stung, as it were, by feelings of the wildest jealousy; and again questioned her, with increased bitterness. La Valliere could not reply, unless she were to acknowledge everything, which would be to accuse the queen, and Madame also; and the consequence would be, that she would have to enter into an open warfare with these two great and powerful princesses. She thought within herself that as she made no attempt to conceal from the king what was passing in her own mind, the king ought to be able to read in her heart, in spite of her silence; and that, had he really loved her, he would have understood and guessed everything. What was sympathy, then, if not that divine flame which possesses the property of enlightening the heart, and of saving lovers the necessity of an expression of their thoughts and feelings? She maintained her silence, therefore, sighing, and concealing her face in her hands. These sighs and tears, which had at first distressed, then terrified Louis XIV., now irritated him. He could not bear opposition, - the opposition which tears and sighs exhibited, any more than opposition of any other kind. His remarks, therefore, became bitter, urgent, and openly aggressive in their nature. This was a fresh cause of distress

for the poor girl. From that very circumstance, therefore, which she regarded as an injustice on her lover's part, she drew sufficient courage to bear, not only her other troubles, but this one also.

The king next began to accuse her in direct terms. La Valliere did not even attempt to defend herself; she endured all his accusations without according any other reply than that of shaking her head; without any other remark than that which escapes the heart in deep distress - a prayerful appeal to Heaven for help. But this ejaculation, instead of calming the king's displeasure, rather increased it. He, moreover, saw himself seconded by Saint-Aignan, for Saint-Aignan, as we have observed, having seen the storm increasing, and not knowing the extent of the regard of which Louis XIV. was capable, felt, by anticipation, all the collected wrath of the three princesses, and the near approach of poor La Valliere's downfall, and he was not true knight enough to resist the fear that he himself might be dragged down in the impending ruin. Saint-Aignan did not reply to the king's questions except by short, dry remarks, pronounced half-aloud; and by abrupt gestures, whose object was to make things worse, and bring about a misunderstanding, the result of which would be to free him from the annoyance of having to cross the courtyards in open day, in order to follow his illustrious companion to La Valliere's apartments. In the meantime the king's anger momentarily increased; he made two or three steps towards the door as if to leave the room, but returned. The young girl did not, however, raise her head, although the sound of his footsteps might have warned her that her lover was leaving her. He drew himself up, for a moment, before her, with his

arms crossed.

"For the last time, mademoiselle," he said, "will you speak? Will you assign a reason for this change, this fickleness, for this caprice?"

"What can I say?" murmured La Valliere. "Do you not see, sire, that I am completely overwhelmed at this moment; that I have no power of will, or thought, or speech?"

"Is it so difficult, then, to speak the truth? You could have told me the whole truth in fewer words than those in which you have expressed yourself."

"But the truth about what, sire?"

"About everything."

La Valliere was just on the point of revealing the truth to the king, her arms made a sudden movement as if they were about to open, but her lips remained silent, and her hands again fell listlessly by her side. The poor girl had not yet endured sufficient unhappiness to risk the necessary revelation. "I know nothing," she stammered out.

"Oh!" exclaimed the king, "this is no longer mere coquetry, or caprice, it is treason."

And this time nothing could restrain him. The impulse of his heart was not sufficient to induce him to turn back, and he darted out of the room with a gesture full of despair. Saint-Aignan followed him, wishing for nothing better than to quit the place.

Louis XIV. did not pause until he reached the staircase, and grasping the balustrade, said: "You see how shamefully I have been duped."

"How, sire?" inquired the favorite.

"De Guiche fought on the Vicomte de Bragelonne's account, and this Bragelonne... oh! Saint-Aignan, she still loves him. I vow to you, Saint-Aignan, that if, in three days from now, there were to remain but an atom of affection for her in my heart, I should die from very shame." And the king resumed his way to his own apartments.

"I told your majesty how it would be," murmured Saint-Aignan, continuing to follow the king, and timidly glancing up at the different windows.

Unfortunately their return was not, like their arrival, unobserved. A curtain was suddenly drawn aside; Madame was behind it. She had seen the king leave the apartments of the maids of honor, and as soon as she observed that his majesty had passed, she left her own apartments with hurried steps, and ran up the staircase that led to the room the king had just left.