

## Chapter 30

Madame.

From the manner in which the king had dismissed the ambassadors, even the

least clear-sighted persons belonging to the court imagined war would ensue. The ambassadors themselves, but slightly acquainted with the king's domestic disturbances, had interpreted as directed against themselves the celebrated sentence: "If I be not master of myself, I, at least, will be so of those who insult me." Happily for the destinies of France and Holland, Colbert had followed them out of the king's presence for the purpose of explaining matters to them; but the two queens and Madame, who were perfectly aware of every particular that had taken place in their several households, having heard the king's remark, so full of dark meaning, retired to their own apartments in no little fear and chagrin. Madame, especially, felt that the royal anger might fall upon her, and, as she was brave and exceedingly proud, instead of seeking support and encouragement from the queen-mother, she had returned to her

own apartments, if not without some uneasiness, at least without any intention of avoiding an encounter. Anne of Austria, from time to time at frequent intervals, sent messages to learn if the king had returned. The silence which the whole palace preserved upon the matter, and upon Louise's disappearance, was indicative of a long train of misfortunes to all those who knew the haughty and irritable humor of the king. But Madame, unmoved in spite of all the flying rumors, shut herself up in her apartments, sent for Montalais, and, with a voice as calm as she could

possibly command, desired her to relate all she knew about the event itself. At the moment that the eloquent Montalais was concluding, with all kinds of oratorical precautions, and was recommending, if not in actual language, at least in spirit, that she should show forbearance towards La Valliere, M. Malicorne made his appearance to beg an audience of Madame, on behalf of the king. Montalais's worthy friend bore upon his countenance all the signs of the very liveliest emotion. It was impossible to be mistaken; the interview which the king requested would be one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the hearts of kings and of men. Madame was disturbed by her brother-in-law's arrival; she did not expect it so soon, nor had she, indeed, expected any direct step on Louis's part. Besides, all women who wage war successfully by indirect means, are invariably neither very skillful nor very strong when it becomes a question of accepting a pitched battle. Madame, however, was not one who ever drew back; she had the very opposite defect or qualification, in whichever light it may be considered; she took an exaggerated view of what constituted real courage; and therefore the king's message, of which Malicorne had been the bearer, was regarded by her as the bugle-note proclaiming the commencement of hostilities. She, therefore, boldly accepted the gage of battle. Five minutes afterwards the king ascended the staircase. His color was heightened from having ridden hard. His dusty and disordered clothes formed a singular contrast with the fresh and perfectly arranged toilette of Madame, who, notwithstanding the rouge on her cheeks, turned pale as Louis entered the room. Louis lost no time in approaching the object of his visit; he sat down, and Montalais disappeared.

"My dear sister," said the king, "you are aware that Mademoiselle de la Valliere fled from her own room this morning, and that she has retired to a cloister, overwhelmed by grief and despair." As he pronounced these words, the king's voice was singularly moved.

"Your majesty is the first to inform me of it," replied Madame.

"I should have thought that you might have learned it this morning, during the reception of the ambassadors," said the king.

"From your emotion, sire, I imagined that something extraordinary had happened, but without knowing what."

The king, with his usual frankness, went straight to the point. "Why did you send Mademoiselle de la Valliere away?"

"Because I had reason to be dissatisfied with her conduct," she replied, dryly.

The king became crimson, and his eyes kindled with a fire which it required all Madame's courage to support. He mastered his anger, however, and continued: "A stronger reason than that is surely requisite, for one so good and kind as you are, to turn away and dishonor, not only the young girl herself, but every member of her family as well. You know that the whole city has its eyes fixed upon the conduct of the female

portion of the court. To dismiss a maid of honor is to attribute a crime to her - at the very least a fault. What crime, what fault has Mademoiselle de la Valliere been guilty of?"

"Since you constitute yourself the protector of Mademoiselle de la Valliere," replied Madame, coldly, "I will give you those explanations which I should have a perfect right to withhold from every one."

"Even from the king!" exclaimed Louis, as, with a sudden gesture, he covered his head with his hat.

"You have called me your sister," said Madame, "and I am in my own apartments."

"It matters not," said the youthful monarch, ashamed at having been hurried away by his anger; "neither you, nor any one else in this kingdom, can assert a right to withhold an explanation in my presence."

"Since that is the way you regard it," said Madame, in a hoarse, angry tone of voice, "all that remains for me to do is bow submission to your majesty, and to be silent."

"Not so. Let there be no equivocation between us."

"The protection with which you surround Mademoiselle de la Valliere does not impose any respect."

"No equivocation, I repeat; you are perfectly aware that, as the head of the nobility in France, I am accountable to all for the honor of every family. You dismiss Mademoiselle de la Valliere, or whoever else it may be - " Madame shrugged her shoulders. "Or whoever else it may be, I repeat," continued the king; "and as, acting in that manner, you cast a dishonorable reflection upon that person, I ask you for an explanation, in order that I may confirm or annul the sentence."

"Annul my sentence!" exclaimed Madame, haughtily. "What! when I have discharged one of my attendants, do you order me to take her back again?" The king remained silent.

"This would be a sheer abuse of power, sire; it would be indecorous and unseemly."

"Madame!"

"As a woman, I should revolt against an abuse so insulting to me; I should no longer be able to regard myself as a princess of your blood, a daughter of a monarch; I should be the meanest of creatures, more humbled and disgraced than the servant I had sent away."

The king rose from his seat with anger. "It cannot be a heart," he cried, "you have beating in your bosom; if you act in such a way with me, I may have reason to act with corresponding severity."

It sometimes happens that in a battle a chance ball may reach its mark. The observation which the king had made without any particular intention, struck Madame home, and staggered her for a moment; some day or other she might indeed have reason to dread reprisals. "At all events, sire," she said, "explain what you require."

"I ask, madame, what has Mademoiselle de la Valliere done to warrant your conduct toward her?"

"She is the most cunning fomenter of intrigues I know; she was the occasion of two personal friends engaging in mortal combat; and has made people talk of her in such shameless terms that the whole court is indignant at the mere sound of her name."

"She! she!" cried the king.

"Under her soft and hypocritical manner," continued Madame, "she hides a disposition full of foul and dark conceit."

"She!"

"You may possibly be deceived, sire, but I know her right well; she is capable of creating dispute and misunderstanding between the most affectionate relatives and the most intimate friends. You see that she

has already sown discord betwixt us two."

"I do assure you - " said the king.

"Sire, look well into the case as it stands; we were living on the most friendly understanding, and by the artfulness of her tales and complaints, she has set your majesty against me."

"I swear to you," said the king, "that on no occasion has a bitter word ever passed her lips; I swear that, even in my wildest bursts of passion, she would not allow me to menace any one; and I swear, too, that you do not possess a more devoted and respectful friend than she is."

"Friend!" said Madame, with an expression of supreme disdain.

"Take care, Madame!" said the king; "you forget that you now understand me, and that from this moment everything is equalized. Mademoiselle de la Valliere will be whatever I may choose her to become; and to-morrow, if I were determined to do so, I could seat her on a throne."

"She was not born to a throne, at least, and whatever you may do can affect the future alone, but cannot affect the past."

"Madame, towards you I have shown every kind consideration, and every eager desire to please you; do not remind me that I am master."

"It is the second time, sire, that you have made that remark, and I have already informed you I am ready to submit."

"In that case, then, you will confer upon me the favor of receiving Mademoiselle de la Valliere back again."

"For what purpose, sire, since you have a throne to bestow upon her? I am too insignificant to protect so exalted a personage."

"Nay, a truce to this bitter and disdainful spirit. Grant me her forgiveness."

"\_Never!\_"

"You drive me, then, to open warfare in my own family."

"I, too, have a family with whom I can find refuge."

"Do you mean that as a threat, and could you forget yourself so far? Do you believe that, if you push the affront to that extent, your family would encourage you?"

"I hope, sire, that you will not force me to take any step which would be unworthy of my rank."

"I hoped that you would remember our recent friendship, and that you



would treat me as a brother."

Madame paused for a moment. "I do not disown you for a brother," she said, "in refusing you majesty an injustice."

"An injustice!"

"Oh, sire! if I informed others of La Valliere's conduct; if the queen knew - "

"Come, come, Henrietta, let your heart speak; remember that, for however brief a time, you once loved me; remember, too, that human hearts should be as merciful as the heart of a sovereign Master. Do not be inflexible with others; forgive La Valliere."

"I cannot; she has offended me."

"But for my sake."

"Sire, it is for your sake I would do anything in the world, except that."

"You will drive me to despair - you compel me to turn to the last resource of weak people, and seek counsel of my angry and wrathful disposition."

"I advise you to be reasonable."

"Reasonable! - I can be so no longer."

"Nay, sire! I pray you - "

"For pity's sake, Henrietta; it is the first time I entreated any one, and I have no hope in any one but in you."

"Oh, sire! you are weeping."

"From rage, from humiliation. That I, the king, should have been obliged to descend to entreaty. I shall hate this moment during my whole life.

You have made me suffer in one moment more distress and more degradation

than I could have anticipated in the greatest extremity in life." And

the king rose and gave free vent to his tears, which, in fact, were tears of anger and shame.

Madame was not touched exactly - for the best women, when their pride is hurt, are without pity; but she was afraid that the tears the king was shedding might possibly carry away every soft and tender feeling in his heart.

"Give what commands you please, sire," she said; "and since you prefer my humiliation to your own - although mine is public and yours has been witnessed but by myself alone - speak, I will obey your majesty."

"No, no, Henrietta!" exclaimed Louis, transported with gratitude, "you will have yielded to a brother's wishes."

"I no longer have any brother, since I obey."

"All that I have would be too little in return."

"How passionately you love, sire, when you do love!"

Louis did not answer. He had seized upon Madame's hand and covered it with kisses. "And so you will receive this poor girl back again, and will forgive her; you will find how gentle and pure-hearted she is."

"I will maintain her in my household."

"No, you will give her your friendship, my sister."

"I never liked her."

"Well, for my sake, you will treat her kindly, will you not, Henrietta?"

"I will treat her as your - mistress."

The king rose suddenly to his feet. By this word, which had so infelicitously escaped her, Madame had destroyed the whole merit of her

sacrifice. The king felt freed from all obligations. Exasperated beyond measure, and bitterly offended, he replied:

"I thank you, Madame; I shall never forget the service you have rendered me." And, saluting her with an affectation of ceremony, he took his leave of her. As he passed before a glass, he saw that his eyes were red, and angrily stamped his foot on the ground. But it was too late, for Malicorne and D'Artagnan, who were standing at the door, had seen his eyes.

"The king has been crying," thought Malicorne. D'Artagnan approached the king with a respectful air, and said in a low tone of voice:

"Sire, it would be better to return to your own apartments by the small staircase."

"Why?"

"Because the dust of the road has left its traces on your face," said D'Artagnan. "By heavens!" he thought, "when the king has given way like a child, let those look to it who may make the lady weep for whom the king sheds tears."