

Chapter 31

Mademoiselle de la Valliere's Pocket-Handkerchief.

Madame was not bad-hearted - she was only hasty and impetuous. The king was not imprudent - he was simply in love. Hardly had they entered into this compact, which terminated in La Valliere's recall, when they both sought to make as much as they could by their bargain. The king wished to see La Valliere every moment of the day, while Madame, who was sensible of the king's annoyance ever since he had so entreated her, would not relinquish her revenge on La Valliere without a contest. She planted every conceivable difficulty in the king's path; he was, in fact, obliged, in order to get a glimpse of La Valliere, to be exceedingly devoted in his attentions to his sister-in-law, and this, indeed, was Madame's plan of policy. As she had chosen some one to second her efforts, and as this person was our old friend Montalais, the king found himself completely hemmed in every time he paid Madame a visit; he was surrounded, and was never left a moment alone. Madame displayed in her conversation a charm of manner and brilliancy of wit which dazzled everybody. Montalais followed her, and soon rendered herself perfectly insupportable to the king, which was, in fact, the very thing she expected would happen. She then set Malicorne at the king, who found means of informing his majesty that there was a young person belonging to the court who was exceedingly miserable; and on the king inquiring who this person was, Malicorne replied that it was Mademoiselle de Montalais. To this the king answered that it was perfectly just that a person should be unhappy when she rendered others so. Whereupon

Malicorne explained how matters stood; for he had received his directions from Montalais. The king began to open his eyes; he remarked that, as soon as he made his appearance, Madame made hers too; that she remained in the corridors until after he had left; that she accompanied him back to his own apartments, fearing that he might speak in the ante-chambers to one of her maids of honor. One evening she went further still. The king was seated, surrounded by the ladies who were present, and holding in his hand, concealed by his lace ruffle, a small note which he wished to slip into La Valliere's hand. Madame guessed both his intention and the letter too. It was difficult to prevent the king going wherever he pleased, and yet it was necessary to prevent his going near La Valliere, or speaking to her, as by so doing he could let the note fall into her lap behind her fan, or into her pocket-handkerchief. The king, who was also on the watch, suspected that a snare was being laid for him. He rose and pushed his chair, without affectation, near Mademoiselle de Chatillon, with whom he began to talk in a light tone. They were amusing themselves making rhymes; from Mademoiselle de Chatillon he went to Montalais, and then to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. And thus, by this skillful maneuver, he found himself seated opposite to La Valliere, whom he completely concealed. Madame pretended to be greatly occupied, altering a group of flowers that she was working in tapestry. The king showed the corner of his letter to La Valliere, and the latter held out her handkerchief with a look that signified, "Put the letter inside." Then, as the king had placed his own handkerchief upon his chair, he was adroit enough to let it fall on the ground, so that La Valliere slipped her handkerchief on the chair. The king took it up quietly, without any

one observing what he did, placed the letter within it, and returned the handkerchief to the place he had taken it from. There was only just time for La Valliere to stretch out her hand to take hold of the handkerchief with its valuable contents.

But Madame, who had observed everything that had passed, said to Mademoiselle de Chatillon, "Chatillon, be good enough to pick up the king's handkerchief, if you please; it has fallen on the carpet."

The young girl obeyed with the utmost precipitation, the king having moved from his seat, and La Valliere being in no little degree nervous and confused.

"Ah! I beg your majesty's pardon," said Mademoiselle de Chatillon; "you have two handkerchiefs, I perceive."

And the king was accordingly obliged to put into his pocket La Valliere's handkerchief as well as his own. He certainly gained that souvenir of Louise, who lost, however, a copy of verses which had cost the king ten hours' hard labor, and which, as far as he was concerned, was perhaps as good as a long poem. It would be impossible to describe the king's anger and La Valliere's despair; but shortly afterwards a circumstance occurred which was more than remarkable. When the king left, in order to retire to his own apartments, Malicorne, informed of what had passed, one can hardly tell how, was waiting in the ante-chamber. The ante-chambers of the Palais Royal are naturally very dark, and, in the evening, they were

but indifferently lighted. Nothing pleased the king more than this dim light. As a general rule, love, whose mind and heart are constantly in a blaze, contemns all light, except the sunshine of the soul. And so the ante-chamber was dark; a page carried a torch before the king, who walked on slowly, greatly annoyed at what had recently occurred. Malicorne passed close to the king, almost stumbled against him in fact, and begged his forgiveness with the profoundest humility; but the king, who was in an exceedingly ill-temper, was very sharp in his reproof to Malicorne, who disappeared as soon and as quietly as he possibly could. Louis retired to rest, having had a misunderstanding with the queen; and the next day, as soon as he entered the cabinet, he wished to have La Valliere's handkerchief in order to press his lips to it. He called his valet.

"Fetch me," he said, "the coat I wore yesterday evening, but be very sure you do not touch anything it may contain."

The order being obeyed, the king himself searched the pocket of the coat; he found only one handkerchief, and that his own; La Valliere's had disappeared. Whilst busied with all kinds of conjectures and suspicions, a letter was brought to him from La Valliere; it ran thus:

"How good and kind of you to have sent me those beautiful verses; how full of ingenuity and perseverance your affection is; how is it possible to help loving you so dearly!"

"What does this mean?" thought the king; "there must be some mistake. Look well about," said he to the valet, "for a pocket-handkerchief must be in one of my pockets; and if you do not find it, or if you have touched it - " He reflected for a moment. To make a state matter of the loss of the handkerchief would be to act absurdly, and he therefore added, "There was a letter of some importance inside the handkerchief, which had somehow got among the folds of it."

"Sire," said the valet, "your majesty had only one handkerchief, and that is it."

"True, true," replied the king, setting his teeth hard together. "Oh, poverty, how I envy you! Happy is the man who can empty his own pockets of letters and handkerchiefs!"

He read La Valliere's letter over again, endeavoring to imagine in what conceivable way his verses could have reached their destination. There was a postscript to the letter:

"I send you back by your messenger this reply, so unworthy of what you sent me."

"So far so good; I shall find out something now," he said delightedly.

"Who is waiting, and who brought me this letter?"

"M. Malicorne," replied the `_valet de chambre_`, timidly.

"Desire him to come in."

Malicorne entered.

"You come from Mademoiselle de la Valliere?" said the king, with a sigh.

"Yes, sire."

"And you took Mademoiselle de la Valliere something from me?"

"I, sire?"

"Yes, you."

"Oh, no, sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere says so, distinctly."

"Oh, sire, Mademoiselle de la Valliere is mistaken."

The king frowned. "What jest is this?" he said; "explain yourself. Why does Mademoiselle de la Valliere call you my messenger? What did you take to that lady? Speak, monsieur, and quickly."

"Sire, I merely took Mademoiselle de la Valliere a pocket-handkerchief,

that was all."

"A handkerchief, - what handkerchief?"

"Sire, at the very moment when I had the misfortune to stumble against your majesty yesterday - a misfortune which I shall deplore to the last day of my life, especially after the dissatisfaction which you exhibited - I remained, sire, motionless with despair, your majesty being at too great a distance to hear my excuses, when I saw something white lying on the ground."

"Ah!" said the king.

"I stooped down, - it was a pocket-handkerchief. For a moment I had an idea that when I stumbled against your majesty I must have been the cause of the handkerchief falling from your pocket; but as I felt it all over very respectfully, I perceived a cipher at one of the corners, and, on looking at it closely, I found that it was Mademoiselle de la Valliere's cipher. I presumed that on her way to Madame's apartment in the earlier part of the evening she had let her handkerchief fall, and I accordingly hastened to restore it to her as she was leaving; and that is all I gave to Mademoiselle de la Valliere, I entreat your majesty to believe."

Malicorne's manner was so simple, so full of contrition, and marked with such extreme humility, that the king was greatly amused in listening to him. He was as pleased with him for what he had done as if he had rendered him the greatest service.

"This is the second fortunate meeting I have had with you, monsieur," he said; "you may count upon my good intentions."

The plain and sober truth was, that Malicorne had picked the king's pocket of the handkerchief as dexterously as any of the pickpockets of the good city of Paris could have done. Madame never knew of this little incident, but Montalais gave La Valliere some idea of the manner in which it had really happened, and La Valliere afterwards told the king, who laughed exceedingly at it and pronounced Malicorne to be a first rate politician. Louis XIV. was right, and it is well known that he was tolerably well acquainted with human nature.