

## Chapter 32

Which Treats of Gardeners, of Ladders, and Maids of Honor.

Miracles, unfortunately, could not be always happening, whilst Madame's ill-humor still continued. In a week's time, matters had reached such a point, that the king could no longer look at La Valliere without a look full of suspicion crossing his own. Whenever a promenade was proposed, Madame, in order to avoid the recurrence of similar scenes to that of the thunder-storm, or the royal oak, had a variety of indispositions ready prepared; and, thanks to them, she was unable to go out, and her maids of honor were obliged to remain indoors also. There was not the slightest chance of means of paying a nocturnal visit; for in this respect the king had, on the very first occasion, experienced a severe check, which happened in the following manner. As at Fontainebleau, he had taken Saint-Aignan with him one evening when he wished to pay La Valliere a visit; but he had found no one but Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who had begun to call out "Fire!" and "Thieves!" in such a manner that a perfect legion of chamber-maids, attendants, and pages, ran to her assistance; so that Saint-Aignan, who had remained behind in order to save the honor of his royal master, who had fled precipitately, was obliged to submit to a severe scolding from the queen-mother, as well as from Madame herself. In addition, he had, the next morning, received two challenges from the De Mortemart family, and the king had been obliged to interfere. This mistake had been owing to the circumstance of Madame having suddenly ordered a change in the apartments of her maids of honor, and directed La Valliere and Montalais to sleep in her own cabinet. No

gateway, therefore, was any longer open - not even communication by letter; to write under the eyes of so ferocious an Argus as Madame, whose temper and disposition were so uncertain, was to run the risk of exposure to the greatest danger; and it can well be conceived into what a state of continuous irritation, and ever increasing anger, all these petty annoyances threw the young lion. The king almost tormented himself to death endeavoring to discover a means of communication; and, as he did not think proper to call in the aid of Malicorne or D'Artagnan, the means were not discovered at all. Malicorne had, indeed, occasional brilliant flashes of imagination, with which he tried to inspire the king with confidence; but, whether from shame or suspicion, the king, who had at first begun to nibble at the bait, soon abandoned the hook. In this way, for instance, one evening, while the king was crossing the garden, and looking up at Madame's windows, Malicorne stumbled over a ladder lying beside a border of box, and said to Manicamp, then walking with him behind the king, "Did you not see that I just now stumbled against a ladder, and was nearly thrown down?"

"No," said Manicamp, as usual very absent-minded, "but it appears you did not fall."

"That doesn't matter; but it is not on that account the less dangerous to leave ladders lying about in that manner."

"True, one might hurt one's self, especially when troubled with fits of absence of mind."

"I don't mean that; what I did mean, was that it is dangerous to allow ladders to lie about so near the windows of the maids of honor." Louis started imperceptibly.

"Why so?" inquired Manicamp.

"Speak louder," whispered Malicorne, as he touched him with his arm.

"Why so?" said Manicamp, louder. The king listened.

"Because, for instance," said Malicorne, "a ladder nineteen feet high is just the height of the cornice of those windows." Manicamp, instead of answering, was dreaming of something else.

"Ask me, can't you, what windows I mean," whispered Malicorne.

"But what windows are you referring to?" said Manicamp, aloud.

"The windows of Madame's apartments."

"Eh!"

"Oh! I don't say that any one would ever venture to go up a ladder into Madame's room; but in Madame's cabinet, merely separated by a partition, sleep two exceedingly pretty girls, Mesdemoiselles de la Valliere and de

Montalais."

"By a partition?" said Manicamp.

"Look; you see how brilliantly lighted Madame's apartments are - well, do you see those two windows?"

"Yes."

"And that window close to the others, but more dimly lighted?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is the room of the maids of honor. Look, there is Mademoiselle de la Valliere opening the window. Ah! how many soft things could an enterprising lover say to her, if he only suspected that there was lying here a ladder nineteen feet long, which would just reach the cornice."

"But she is not alone; you said Mademoiselle de Montalais is with her."

"Mademoiselle de Montalais counts for nothing; she is her oldest friend, and exceedingly devoted to her - a positive well, into which can be thrown all sorts of secrets one might wish to get rid of."

The king did not lose a single syllable of this conversation. Malicorne

even remarked that his majesty slackened his pace, in order to give him time to finish. So, when they arrived at the door, Louis dismissed every one, with the exception of Malicorne - a circumstance which excited no surprise, for it was known that the king was in love; and they suspected he was going to compose some verses by moonlight; and, although there was no moon that evening, the king might, nevertheless, have some verses to compose. Every one, therefore, took his leave; and, immediately afterwards, the king turned towards Malicorne, who respectfully waited until his majesty should address him. "What were you saying, just now, about a ladder, Monsieur Malicorne?" he asked.

"Did I say anything about ladders, sire?" said Malicorne, looking up, as if in search of words which had flown away.

"Yes, of a ladder nineteen feet long."

"Oh, yes, sire, I remember; but I spoke to M. Manicamp, and I should not have said a word had I known your majesty was near enough to hear us."

"And why would you not have said a word?"

"Because I should not have liked to get the gardener into a scrape who left it there - poor fellow!"

"Don't make yourself uneasy on that account. What is this ladder like?"

"If your majesty wishes to see it, nothing is easier, for there it is."

"In that box hedge?"

"Exactly."

"Show it to me."

Malicorne turned back, and led the king up to the ladder, saying, "This is it, sire."

"Pull it this way a little."

When Malicorne had brought the ladder on to the gravel walk, the king began to step its whole length. "Hum!" he said; "you say it is nineteen feet long?"

"Yes, sire."

"Nineteen feet - that is rather long; I hardly believe it can be so long as that."

"You cannot judge very correctly with the ladder in that position, sire. If it were upright, against a tree or a wall, for instance, you would be better able to judge, because the comparison would assist you a good deal."

"Oh! it does not matter, M. Malicorne; but I can hardly believe that the ladder is nineteen feet high."

"I know how accurate your majesty's glance is, and yet I would wager."

The king shook his head. "There is one unanswerable means of verifying it," said Malicorne.

"What is that?"

"Every one knows, sire, that the ground-floor of the palace is eighteen feet high."

"True, that is very well known."

"Well, sire, if I place the ladder against the wall, we shall be able to ascertain."

"True."

Malicorne took up the ladder, like a feather, and placed it upright against the wall. And, in order to try the experiment, he chose, or chance, perhaps, directed him to choose, the very window of the cabinet where La Valliere was. The ladder just reached the edge of the cornice, that is to say, the sill of the window; so that, by standing upon the

last round but one of the ladder, a man of about the middle height, as the king was, for instance, could easily talk with those who might be in the room. Hardly had the ladder been properly placed, when the king, dropping the assumed part he had been playing in the comedy, began to ascend the rounds of the ladder, which Malicorne held at the bottom. But hardly had he completed half the distance when a patrol of Swiss guards appeared in the garden, and advanced straight towards them. The king descended with the utmost precipitation, and concealed himself among the trees. Malicorne at once perceived that he must offer himself as a sacrifice; for if he, too, were to conceal himself, the guard would search everywhere until they had found either himself or the king, perhaps both. It would be far better, therefore, that he alone should be discovered. And, consequently, Malicorne hid himself so clumsily that he was the only one arrested. As soon as he was arrested, Malicorne was taken to the guard-house, and there he declared who he was, and was immediately recognized. In the meantime, by concealing himself first behind one clump of trees and then behind another, the king reached the side door of his apartment, very much humiliated, and still more disappointed. More than that, the noise made in arresting Malicorne had drawn La Valliere and Montalais to their window; and even Madame herself had appeared at her own, with a pair of wax candles, one in each hand, clamorously asking what was the matter.

In the meantime, Malicorne sent for D'Artagnan, who did not lose a moment in hurrying to him. But it was in vain he attempted to make him understand his reasons, and in vain also that D'Artagnan did understand



them; and, further, it was equally in vain that both their sharp and intuitive minds endeavored to give another turn to the adventure; there was no other resource left for Malicorne but to let it be supposed that he had wished to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais's apartment, as Saint-Aignan had passed for having wished to force Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's door. Madame was inflexible; in the first place, because, if Malicorne had, in fact, wished to enter her apartment at night through the window, and by means of the ladder, in order to see Montalais, it was a punishable offense on Malicorne's part, and he must be punished accordingly; and, in the second place, if Malicorne, instead of acting in his own name, had acted as an intermediary between La Valliere and a person whose name it was superfluous to mention, his crime was in that case even greater, since love, which is an excuse for everything, did not exist in the case as an excuse. Madame therefore made the greatest possible disturbance about the matter, and obtained his dismissal from Monsieur's household, without reflecting, poor blind creature, that both Malicorne and Montalais held her fast in their clutches in consequence of her visit to De Guiche, and in a variety of other ways equally delicate. Montalais, who was perfectly furious, wished to revenge herself immediately, but Malicorne pointed out to her that the king's countenance would repay them for all the disgraces in the world, and that it was a great thing to have to suffer on his majesty's account.

Malicorne was perfectly right, and, therefore, although Montalais had the spirit of ten women in her, he succeeded in bringing her round to his own opinion. And we must not omit to state that the king helped them to

console themselves, for, in the first place, he presented Malicorne with fifty thousand francs as a compensation for the post he had lost, and, in the next place, he gave him an appointment in his own household, delighted to have an opportunity of revenging himself in such a manner upon Madame for all she had made him and La Valliere suffer. But as Malicorne could no longer carry significant handkerchiefs for him or plant convenient ladders, the royal lover was in a terrible state. There seemed to be no hope, therefore, of ever getting near La Valliere again, so long as she should remain at the Palais Royal. All the dignities and all the money in the world could not remedy that. Fortunately, however, Malicorne was on the lookout, and this so successfully that he met Montalais, who, to do her justice, it must be admitted, was doing her best to meet Malicorne. "What do you do during the night in Madame's apartment?" he asked the young girl.

"Why, I go to sleep, of course," she replied.

"But it is very wrong to sleep; it can hardly be possible that, with the pain you are suffering, you can manage to do so."

"And what am I suffering from, may I ask?"

"Are you not in despair at my absence?"

"Of course not, since you have received fifty thousand francs and an appointment in the king's household."

"That is a matter of no moment; you are exceedingly afflicted at not seeing me as you used to see me formerly, and more than all, you are in despair at my having lost Madame's confidence; come now, is not that true?"

"Perfectly true."

"Very good; your distress of mind prevents you sleeping at night, and so you sob, and sigh, and blow your nose ten times every minute as loud as possible."

"But, my dear Malicorne, Madame cannot endure the slightest noise near her."

"I know that perfectly well; of course she can't endure anything; and so, I tell you, when she hears your deep distress, she will turn you out of her rooms without a moment's delay."

"I understand."

"Very fortunate you \_do\_."

"Well, and what will happen next?"

"The next thing that will happen will be, that La Valliere, finding

herself alone without you, will groan and utter such loud lamentations, that she will exhibit despair enough for two."

"In that case she will be put into another room, don't you see?"

"Precisely so."

"Yes, but which?"

"Which?"

"Yes, that will puzzle you to say, Mr. Inventor-General."

"Not at all; whenever and whatever the room may be, it will always be preferable to Madame's own room."

"That is true."

"Very good, so begin your lamentations to-night."

"I certainly will not fail to do so."

"And give La Valliere a hint also."

"Oh! don't fear her, she cries quite enough already to herself."

"Very well! all she has to do is cry out loudly."

And they separated.