

Chapter 33

Which Treats of Carpentry Operations, and Furnishes Details upon the Mode of Constructing Staircases.

The advice which had been given to Montalais was communicated by her to La Valliere, who could not but acknowledge that it was by no means deficient in judgment, and who, after a certain amount of resistance, rising rather from timidity than indifference to the project, resolved to put it into execution. This story of the two girls weeping, and filling Madame's bedroom with the noisiest lamentations, was Malicorne's *_chef-d'oeuvre_*. As nothing is so probable as improbability, so natural as romance, this kind of Arabian Nights story succeeded perfectly with Madame. The first thing she did was to send Montalais away, and then, three days, or rather three nights afterwards, she had La Valliere removed. She gave the latter one of the small rooms on the top story, situated immediately over the apartments allotted to the gentlemen of Monsieur's suite. One story only, that is to say, a mere flooring separated the maids of honor from the officers and gentlemen of her husband's household. A private staircase, which was placed under Madame de Navailles's surveillance, was the only means of communication. For greater safety, Madame de Navailles, who had heard of his majesty's previous attempts, had the windows of the rooms and the openings of the chimneys carefully barred. There was, therefore, every possible security provided for Mademoiselle de la Valliere, whose room now bore more resemblance to a cage than to anything else. When Mademoiselle de la

Valliere was in her own room, and she was there very frequently, for Madame scarcely ever had any occasion for her services, since she once knew she was safe under Madame de Navailles's inspection, Mademoiselle de la Valliere had no better means of amusing herself than looking through the bars of her windows. It happened, therefore, that one morning, as she was looking out as usual, she perceived Malicorne at one of the windows exactly opposite to her own. He held a carpenter's rule in his hand, was surveying the buildings, and seemed to be adding up some figures on paper. La Valliere recognized Malicorne and nodded to him; Malicorne, in his turn, replied by a formal bow, and disappeared from the window. She was surprised at this marked coolness, so different from his usual unfailing good-humor, but she remembered that he had lost his appointment on her account, and that he could hardly be very amiably disposed towards her, since, in all probability, she would never be in a position to make him any recompense for what he had lost. She knew how to forgive offenses, and with still more readiness could she sympathize with misfortune. La Valliere would have asked Montalais her opinion, if she had been within hearing, but she was absent, it being the hour she commonly devoted to her own correspondence. Suddenly La Valliere observed something thrown from the window where Malicorne had been standing, pass across the open space which separated the iron bars, and roll upon the floor. She advanced with no little curiosity towards this object, and picked it up; it was a wooden reel for silk, only, in this instance, instead of silk, a piece of paper was rolled round it. La Valliere unrolled it and read as follows:

"MADEMOISELLE, - I am exceedingly anxious to learn two things: the first is, to know if the flooring of your apartment is wood or brick; the second, to ascertain at what distance your bed is placed from the window. Forgive my importunity, and will you be good enough to send me an answer by the same way you receive this letter - that is to say, by means of the silk winder; only, instead of throwing into my room, as I have thrown it into yours, which will be too difficult for you to attempt, have the goodness merely to let it fall. Believe me, mademoiselle, your most humble, most respectful servant,
"MALICORNE.

"Write the reply, if you please, upon the letter itself."

"Ah! poor fellow," exclaimed La Valliere, "he must have gone out of his mind;" and she directed towards her correspondent - of whom she caught but a faint glimpse, in consequence of the darkness of the room - a look full of compassionate consideration. Malicorne understood her, and shook his head, as if he meant to say, "No, no, I am not out of my mind; be quite satisfied."

She smiled, as if still in doubt.

"No, no," he signified by a gesture, "my head is right," and pointed to his head, then, after moving his hand like a man who writes very rapidly, he put his hands together as if entreating her to write.

La Valliere, even if he were mad, saw no impropriety in doing what Malicorne requested her; she took a pencil and wrote "Wood," and then walked slowly from her window to her bed, and wrote, "Six paces," and having done this, she looked out again at Malicorne, who bowed to her, signifying that he was about to descend. La Valliere understood that it was to pick up the silk winder. She approached the window, and, in accordance with Malicorne's instructions, let it fall. The winder was still rolling along the flag-stones as Malicorne started after it, overtook and picked it up, and beginning to peel it as a monkey would do with a nut, he ran straight towards M. de Saint-Aignan's apartment. Saint-Aignan had chosen, or rather solicited, that his rooms might be as near the king as possible, as certain plants seek the sun's rays in order to develop themselves more luxuriantly. His apartment consisted of two rooms, in that portion of the palace occupied by Louis XIV. himself. M. de Saint-Aignan was very proud of this proximity, which afforded easy access to his majesty, and, more than that, the favor of occasional unexpected meetings. At the moment we are now referring to, he was engaged in having both his rooms magnificently carpeted, with expectation of receiving the honor of frequent visits from the king; for his majesty, since his passion for La Valliere, had chosen Saint-Aignan as his confidant, and could not, in fact, do without him, either night or day. Malicorne introduced himself to the comte, and met with no difficulties, because he had been favorably noticed by the king; and also, because the credit which one man may happen to enjoy is always a bait for others. Saint-Aignan asked his visitor if he brought any news with him.

"Yes; great news," replied the latter.

"Ah! ah!" said Saint-Aignan, "what is it?"

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere has changed her quarters."

"What do you mean?" said Saint-Aignan, opening his eyes very wide. "She was living in the same apartments as Madame."

"Precisely so; but Madame got tired of her proximity, and has installed her in a room which is situated exactly above your future apartment."

"What! up there," exclaimed Saint-Aignan, with surprise, and pointing at the floor above him with his finger.

"No," said Malicorne, "yonder," indicating the building opposite.

"What do you mean, then, by saying that her room is above my apartment?"

"Because I am sure that your apartment _ought_, providentially, to be under Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room."

Saint-Aignan, at this remark, gave poor Malicorne a look, similar to one of those La Valliere had already given a quarter of an hour before, that is to say, he thought he had lost his senses.

"Monsieur," said Malicorne to him, "I wish to answer what you are thinking about."

"What do you mean by 'what I am thinking about'?"

"My reason is, that you have not clearly understood what I want to convey."

"I admit it."

"Well, then, you are aware that underneath the apartments set for Madame's maids of honor, the gentlemen in attendance on the king and on Monsieur are lodged."

"Yes, I know that, since Manicamp, De Wardes, and others are living there."

"Precisely. Well, monsieur, admire the singularity of the circumstance; the two rooms destined for M. de Guiche are exactly the very two rooms situated underneath those which Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de la Valliere occupy."

"Well; what then?"

"'What then,' do you say? Why, these two rooms are empty, since M. de Guiche is now lying wounded at Fontainebleau."

"I assure you, my dear fellow, I cannot grasp your meaning."

"Well! if I had the happiness to call myself Saint-Aignan, I should guess immediately."

"And what would you do then?"

"I should at once change the rooms I am occupying here, for those which M. de Guiche is not using yonder."

"Can you suppose such a thing?" said Saint-Aignan, disdainfully. "What! abandon the chief post of honor, the proximity to the king, a privilege conceded only to princes of the blood, to dukes, and peers! Permit me to tell you, my dear Monsieur de Malicorne, that you must be out of your senses."

"Monsieur," replied the young man, seriously, "you commit two mistakes. My name is Malicorne, simply; and I am in perfect possession of all my senses." Then, drawing a paper from his pocket, he said, "Listen to what I am going to say; and afterwards, I will show you this paper."

"I am listening," said Saint-Aignan.

"You know that Madame looks after La Valliere as carefully as Argus did after the nymph Io."

"I do."

"You know that the king has sought for an opportunity, but uselessly, of speaking to the prisoner, and that neither you nor myself have yet succeeded in procuring him this piece of good fortune."

"You certainly ought to know something about the subject, my poor Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, smiling.

"Very good; what do you suppose would happen to the man whose imagination devised some means of bringing the lovers together?"

"Oh! the king would set no bounds to his gratitude."

"Let me ask you, then, M. de Saint-Aignan, whether you would not be curious to taste a little of this royal gratitude?"

"Certainly," replied Saint-Aignan, "any favor of my master, as a recognition of the proper discharge of my duty, would assuredly be most precious."

"In that case, look at this paper, monsieur le comte."

"What is it - a plan?"

"Yes; a plan of M. de Guiche's two rooms, which, in all probability, will soon be your two rooms."

"Oh! no, whatever may happen."

"Why so?"

"Because my rooms are the envy of too many gentlemen, to whom I certainly shall not give them up; M. de Roquelaure, for instance, M. de la Ferte, and M. de Dangeau, would all be anxious to get them."

"In that case I shall leave you, monsieur le comte, and I shall go and offer to one of those gentlemen the plan I have just shown you, together with the advantages annexed to it."

"But why do you not keep them for yourself?" inquired Saint-Aignan, suspiciously.

"Because the king would never do me the honor of paying me a visit openly, whilst he would readily go and see any one of those gentlemen."

"What! the king would go and see any one of those gentlemen?"

"Go! most certainly he would ten times instead of once. Is it possible you can ask me if the king would go to an apartment which would bring him

nearer to Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

"Yes, indeed, delightfully near her, with a floor between them."

Malicorne unfolded the piece of paper which had been wrapped round the bobbin. "Monsieur le comte," he said, "have the goodness to observe that the flooring of Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room is merely a wooden flooring."

"Well?"

"Well! all you would have to do would be to get hold of a journeyman carpenter, lock him up in your apartments, without letting him know where you have taken him to, and let him make a hole in your ceiling, and consequently in the flooring of Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Saint-Aignan, as if dazzled.

"What is the matter?" said Malicorne.

"Nothing, except that you have hit upon a singular, bold idea, monsieur."

"It will seem a very trifling one to the king, I assure you."

"Lovers never think of the risk they run."

"What danger do you apprehend, monsieur le comte?"

"Why, effecting such an opening as that will make a terrible noise: it could be heard all over the palace."

"Oh! monsieur le comte, I am quite sure that the carpenter I shall select will not make the slightest noise in the world. He will saw an opening three feet square, with a saw covered with tow, and no one, not even those adjoining, will know that he is at work."

"My dear Monsieur Malicorne, you astound, you positively bewilder me."

"To continue," replied Malicorne, quietly, "in the room, the ceiling of which you will have cut through, you will put up a staircase, which will either allow Mademoiselle de la Valliere to descend into your room, or the king to ascend into Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room."

"But the staircase will be seen."

"No; for in your room it will be hidden by a partition, over which you will throw a tapestry similar to that which covers the rest of the apartment; and in Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room it will not be seen, for the trapdoor, which will be a part of the flooring itself, will be made to open under the bed."

"Of course," said Saint-Aignan, whose eyes began to sparkle with delight.

"And now, monsieur le comte, there is no occasion to make you admit that the king will frequently come to the room where such a staircase is constructed. I think that M. Dangeau, particularly, will be struck by my idea, and I shall now go and explain to him."

"But, my dear Monsieur Malicorne, you forget that you spoke to me about it the first, and that I have consequently the right of priority."

"Do you wish for the preference?"

"Do I wish it? Of course I do."

"The fact is, Monsieur de Saint-Aignan, I am presenting you with a Jacob's ladder, which is better than the promise of an additional step in the peerage - perhaps, even with a good estate to accompany your dukedom."

"At least," replied Saint-Aignan, "it will give me an opportunity of showing the king that he is not mistaken in occasionally calling me his friend; an opportunity, dear M. Malicorne, for which I am indebted to you."

"And which you will not forget to remember?" inquired Malicorne, smiling.

"Nothing will delight me more, monsieur."

"But I am not the king's friend; I am simply his attendant."

"Yes; and if you imagine that that staircase is as good as a dukedom for myself, I think there will certainly be letters of nobility at the top of it for you."

Malicorne bowed.

"All I have to do now," said Saint-Aignan, "is to move as soon as possible."

"I do not think the king will object to it. Ask his permission, however."

"I will go and see him this very moment."

"And I will run and get the carpenter I was speaking of."

"When will he be here?"

"This very evening."

"Do not forget your precautions."

"He shall be brought with his eyes bandaged."

"And I will send you one of my carriages."

"Without arms."

"And one of my servants without livery. But stay, what will La Valliere say if she sees what is going on?"

"Oh! I can assure you she will be very much interested in the operation, and I am equally sure that if the king has not courage enough to ascend to her room, she will have sufficient curiosity to come down to him."

"We will live in hope," said Saint-Aignan; "and now I am off to his majesty. At what time will the carpenter be here?"

"At eight o'clock."

"How long do you suppose he will take to make this opening?"

"About a couple of hours; only afterwards he must have sufficient time to construct what may be called the hyphen between the two rooms. One night and a portion of the following day will do; we must not reckon upon less than two days, including putting up the staircase."

"Two days, that is a very long time."

"Nay; when one undertakes to open up communications with paradise itself,

we must at least take care that the approaches are respectable."

"Quite right; so farewell for a short time, dear M. Malicorne. I shall begin to remove the day after to-morrow, in the evening."