

## Chapter 34

### The Promenade by Torchlight.

Saint-Aignan, delighted with what he had just heard, and rejoiced at what the future foreshadowed for him, bent his steps towards De Guiche's two rooms. He who, a quarter of an hour previously, would hardly yield up his own rooms for a million francs, was now ready to expend a million, if it were necessary, upon the acquisition of the two happy rooms he coveted so eagerly. But he did not meet with so many obstacles. M. de Guiche did not yet know where he was to lodge, and, besides, was still too far ill to trouble himself about his lodgings; and so Saint-Aignan obtained De Guiche's two rooms without difficulty. As for M. Dangeau, he was so immeasurably delighted, that he did not even give himself the trouble to think whether Saint-Aignan had any particular reason for removing. Within an hour after Saint-Aignan's new resolution, he was in possession of the two rooms; and ten minutes later Malicorne entered, followed by the upholsterers. During this time, the king asked for Saint-Aignan; the valet ran to his late apartments and found M. Dangeau there; Dangeau sent him on to De Guiche's, and Saint-Aignan was found there; but a little delay had of course taken place, and the king had already exhibited once or twice evident signs of impatience, when Saint-Aignan entered his royal master's presence, quite out of breath.

"You, too, abandon me, then," said Louis XIV., in a similar tone of lamentation to that with which Caesar, eighteen hundred years previously, had pronounced the *Et tu quoque*.

"Sire, I am far from abandoning you, for, on the contrary, I am busily occupied in changing my lodgings."

"What do you mean? I thought you had finished moving three days ago."

"Yes, sire. But I don't find myself comfortable where I am, so I am going to change to the opposite side of the building."

"Was I not right when I said you were abandoning me?" exclaimed the king. "Oh! this exceeds all endurance. But so it is: there was only one woman for whom my heart cared at all, and all my family is leagued together to tear her from me; and my friend, to whom I confided my distress, and who helped me to bear up under it, has become wearied of my complaints and is going to leave me without even asking my permission."

Saint-Aignan began to laugh. The king at once guessed there must be some mystery in this want of respect. "What is it?" cried the king, full of hope.

"This, sire, that the friend whom the king calumniates is going to try if he cannot restore to his sovereign the happiness he has lost."

"Are you going to let me see La Valliere?" said Louis XIV.

"I cannot say so, positively, but I hope so."

"How - how? - tell me that, Saint-Aignan. I wish to know what your project is, and to help you with all my power."

"Sire," replied Saint-Aignan, "I cannot, even myself, tell very well how I must set about attaining success; but I have every reason to believe that from to-morrow - "

"To-morrow, do you say! What happiness! But why are you changing your rooms?"

"In order to serve your majesty to better advantage."

"How can your moving serve me?"

"Do you happen to know where the two rooms destined for De Guiche are situated?"

"Yes."

"Well, your majesty now knows where I am going."

"Very likely; but that does not help me."

"What! is it possible that you do not understand, sire, that above De Guiche's lodgings are two rooms, one of which is Mademoiselle

Montalais's, and the other - "

"La Valliere's, is it not so, Saint-Aignan? Oh! yes, yes. It is a brilliant idea, Saint-Aignan, a true friend's idea, a poet's idea. By bringing me nearer her from whom the world seems to unite to separate me - you are far more than Pylades was for Orestes, or Patroclus for Achilles."

"Sire," said Aignan, with a smile, "I question whether, if your majesty were to know my projects in their full extent, you would continue to pronounce such a pompous eulogium upon me. Ah! sire, I know how very different are the epithets which certain Puritans of the court will not fail to apply to me when they learn of what I intend to do for your majesty."

"Saint-Aignan, I am dying with impatience; I am in a perfect fever; I shall never be able to wait until to-morrow - to-morrow! why, to-morrow is an eternity!"

"And yet, sire, I shall require you, if you please, to go out presently and divert your impatience by a good walk."

"With you - agreed; we will talk about your projects, we will talk of her."

"Nay, sire; I remain here."

"Whom shall I go out with, then?"

"With the queen and all the ladies of the court."

"Nothing shall induce me to do that, Saint-Aignan."

"And yet, sire, you must."

"\_Must?\_ - no, no - a thousand times no! I will never again expose myself to the horrible torture of being close to her, of seeing her, of touching her dress as I pass by her, and yet not be able to say a word to her. No, I renounce a torture which you suppose will bring me happiness, but which consumes and eats away my very life; to see her in the presence of strangers, and not to tell her that I love her, when my whole being reveals my affection and betrays me to every one; no! I have sworn never to do it again, and I will keep my oath."

"Yet, sire, pray listen to me for a moment."

"I will listen to nothing, Saint-Aignan."

"In that case, I will continue; it is most urgent, sire - pray understand me, it is of the greatest importance - that Madame and her maids of honor should be absent for two hours from the palace."

"I cannot understand your meaning at all, Saint-Aignan."

"It is hard for me to give my sovereign directions what to do; but under the circumstances I do give you directions, sire; and either a hunting or a promenade party must be got up."

"But if I were to do what you wish, it would be a caprice, a mere whim. In displaying such an impatient humor I show my whole court that I have no control over my own feelings. Do not people already say that I am dreaming of the conquest of the world, but that I ought previously to begin by achieving a conquest over myself?"

"Those who say so, sire, are as insolent as they would like to be thought facetious; but whomever they may be, if your majesty prefers to listen to them, I have nothing further to say. In such a case, that which we have fixed to take place to-morrow must be postponed indefinitely."

"Nay, Saint-Aignan, I will go out this evening - I will go by torchlight to Saint-Germain: I will breakfast there to-morrow, and will return to Paris by three o'clock. Will that do?"

"Admirably."

"In that case I will set out this evening at eight o'clock."

"Your majesty has fixed upon the exact minute."

"And you positively will tell me nothing more?"

"It is because I have nothing more to tell you. Industry counts for something in this world, sire; but still, chance plays so important a part in it that I have been accustomed to leave her the sidewalk, confident that she will manage so as to always take the street."

"Well, I abandon myself entirely to you."

"And you are quite right."

Comforted in this manner, the king went immediately to Madame, to whom he announced the intended expedition. Madame fancied at the first moment that she saw in this unexpectedly arranged party a plot of the king's to converse with La Valliere, either on the road under cover of the darkness, or in some other way, but she took especial care not to show any of her fancies to her brother-in-law, and accepted the invitation with a smile upon her lips. She gave directions aloud that her maids of honor should accompany her, secretly intending in the evening to take the most effectual steps to interfere with his majesty's attachment. Then, when she was alone, and at the very moment the poor lover, who had issued orders for the departure, was reveling in the idea that Mademoiselle de la Valliere would form one of the party, - luxuriating in the sad happiness persecuted lovers enjoy of realizing through the sense of sight

alone all the transports of possession, - Madame, who was surrounded by her maids of honor, was saying: - "Two ladies will be enough for me this evening, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Mademoiselle de Montalais."

La Valliere had anticipated her own omission, and was prepared for it: but persecution had rendered her courageous, and she did not give Madame the pleasure of seeing on her face the impression of the shock her heart received. On the contrary, smiling with that ineffable gentleness which gave an angelic expression to her features - "In that case, Madame, I shall be at liberty this evening, I suppose?" she said.

"Of course."

"I shall be able to employ it, then, in progressing with that piece of tapestry which your highness has been good enough to notice, and which I have already had the honor of offering to you."

And having made a respectful obeisance she withdrew to her own apartment;

Mesdemoiselles de Tonnay-Charente and de Montalais did the same. The rumor of the intended promenade soon spread all over the palace; ten minutes afterwards Malicorne learned Madame's resolution, and slipped under Montalais's door a note, in the following terms:

"L. V. must positively pass the night the night with Madame."



Montalais, in pursuance of the compact she had entered into, began by burning the letter, and then sat down to reflect. Montalais was a girl full of expedients, and so she very soon arranged her plan. Towards five o'clock, which was the hour for her to repair to Madame's apartment, she was running across the courtyard, and had reached within a dozen paces of a group of officers, when she uttered a cry, fell gracefully on one knee, rose again, with difficulty, and walked on limpingly. The gentlemen ran forward to her assistance; Montalais had sprained her foot. Faithful to the discharge of her duty, she insisted, however, notwithstanding her accident, upon going to Madame's apartments.

"What is the matter, and why do you limp so?" she inquired; "I mistook you for La Valliere."

Montalais related how it had happened, that in hurrying on, in order to arrive as quickly as possible, she had sprained her foot. Madame seemed to pity her, and wished to have a surgeon sent for immediately, but she, assuring her that there was nothing really serious in the accident, said: "My only regret, Madame, is, that it will preclude my attendance on you, and I should have begged Mademoiselle de la Valliere to take my place with your royal highness, but - " seeing that Madame frowned, she added - "I have not done so."

"Why did you not do so?" inquired Madame.

"Because poor La Valliere seemed so happy to have her liberty for a whole

evening and night too, that I did not feel courageous enough to ask her to take my place."

"What, is she so delighted as that?" inquired madame, struck by these words.

"She is wild with delight; she, who is always so melancholy, was singing like a bird. Besides, your highness knows how much she detests going out, and also that her character has a spice of wildness in it."

"So!" thought Madame, "this extreme delight hardly seems natural to me."

"She has already made all her preparations for dining in her own room \_tete-a-tete\_ with one of her favorite books. And then, as your highness has six other young ladies who would be delighted to accompany you, I did not make my proposal to La Valliere." Madame did not say a word in reply.

"Have I acted properly?" continued Montalais, with a slight fluttering of the heart, seeing the little success that seemed to attend the \_ruse de guerre\_ which she had relied upon with so much confidence that she had not thought it even necessary to try and find another. "Does Madame approve of what I have done?" she continued.

Madame was reflecting that the king could very easily leave Saint-Germain during the night, and that, as it was only four leagues and a half from Paris to Saint-Germain, he might readily be in Paris in an hour's time.

"Tell me," she said, "whether La Valliere, when she heard of your accident, offered at least to bear you company?"

"Oh! she does not yet know of my accident; but even did she know of it, I most certainly should not ask her to do anything that might interfere with her own plans. I think she wishes this evening to realize quietly by herself that amusement of the late king, when he said to M. de Cinq-Mars, 'Let us amuse ourselves by doing nothing, and making ourselves miserable.'"

Madame felt convinced that some mysterious love adventure lurked behind this strong desire for solitude. The secret might be Louis's return during the night; it could not be doubted any longer La Valliere had been informed of his intended return, and that was the reason for her delight at having to remain behind at the Palais Royal. It was a plan settled and arranged beforehand.

"I will not be their dupe though," said Madame, and she took a decisive step. "Mademoiselle de Montalais," she said, "will you have the goodness to inform your friend, Mademoiselle de la Valliere, that I am exceedingly sorry to disarrange her projects of solitude, but that instead of becoming ennuyee by remaining behind alone as she wished, she will be good enough to accompany us to Saint-Germain and get ennuyee there."

"Ah! poor La Valliere," said Montalais, compassionately, but with her heart throbbing with delight; "oh, Madame, could there not be some

means - "

"Enough," said Madame; "I desire it. I prefer Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc's society to that of any one else. Go, and send her to me, and take care of your foot."

Montalais did not wait for the order to be repeated; she returned to her room, almost forgetting to feign lameness, wrote an answer to Malicorne, and slipped it under the carpet. The answer simply said: "She shall." A Spartan could not have written more laconically.

"By this means," thought Madame, "I will look narrowly after all on the road; she shall sleep near me during the night, and his majesty must be very clever if he can exchange a single word with Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

La Valliere received the order to set off with the same indifferent gentleness with which she had received the order to play Cinderella. But, inwardly, her delight was extreme, and she looked upon this change in the princess's resolution as a consolation which Providence had sent her. With less penetration than Madame possessed, she attributed all to chance. While every one, with the exception of those in disgrace, of those who were ill, and those who were suffering from sprains, were being driven towards Saint-Germain, Malicorne smuggled his workman into the palace in one of M. de Saint-Aignan's carriages, and led him into the room corresponding to La Valliere's. The man set to work with a will,

tempted by the splendid reward which had been promised him. As the very best tools and implements had been selected from the reserve stock belonging to the engineers attached to the king's household - and among others, a saw with teeth so sharp and well tempered that it was able, under water even, to cut through oaken joists as hard as iron - the work in question advanced very rapidly, and a square portion of the ceiling, taken from between two of the joists, fell into the arms of the delighted Saint-Aignan, Malicorne, the workman, and a confidential valet, the latter being one brought into the world to see and hear everything, but to repeat nothing. In accordance with a new plan indicated by Malicorne, the opening was effected in an angle of the room - and for this reason. As there was no dressing-closet adjoining La Valliere's room, she had solicited, and had that very morning obtained, a large screen intended to serve as a partition. The screen that had been allotted her was perfectly sufficient to conceal the opening, which would, besides, be hidden by all the artifices skilled cabinet-makers would have at their command. The opening having been made, the workman glided between the joists, and found himself in La Valliere's room. When there, he cut a square opening in the flooring, and out of the boards he manufactured a trap so accurately fitting into the opening that the most practised eye could hardly detect the necessary interstices made by its lines of juncture with the floor. Malicorne had provided for everything: a ring and a couple of hinges which had been bought for the purpose, were affixed to the trap-door; and a small circular stair-case, packed in sections, had been bought ready made by the industrious Malicorne, who had paid two thousand francs for it. It was higher than what was

required, but the carpenter reduced the number of steps, and it was found to suit exactly. This staircase, destined to receive so illustrious a burden, was merely fastened to the wall by a couple of iron clamps, and its base was fixed into the floor of the comte's room by two iron pegs screwed down tightly, so that the king, and all his cabinet councilors too, might pass up and down the staircase without any fear. Every blow of the hammer fell upon a thick pad or cushion, and the saw was not used until the handle had been wrapped in wool, and the blade steeped in oil. The noisiest part of the work, moreover, had taken place during the night and early in the morning, that is to say, when La Valliere and Madame were both absent. When, about two o'clock in the afternoon, the court returned to the Palais Royal, La Valliere went up into her own room. Everything was in its proper place - not the smallest particle of sawdust, not the smallest chip, was left to bear witness to the violation of her domicile. Saint-Aignan, however, wishing to do his utmost in forwarding the work, had torn his fingers and his shirt too, and had expended no ordinary amount of perspiration in the king's service. The palms of his hands were covered with blisters, occasioned by his having held the ladder for Malicorne. He had, moreover, brought up, one by one, the seven pieces of the staircase, each consisting of two steps. In fact, we can safely assert that, if the king had seen him so ardently at work, his majesty would have sworn an eternal gratitude towards his faithful attendant. As Malicorne anticipated, the workman had completely finished the job in twenty-four hours; he received twenty-four louis, and left, overwhelmed with delight, for he had gained in one day as much as six months' hard work would have procured him. No one had the slightest

suspicion of what had taken place in the room under Mademoiselle de la Valliere's apartment. But in the evening of the second day, at the very moment La Valliere had just left Madame's circle and returned to her own room, she heard a slight creaking sound in one corner. Astonished, she looked to see whence it proceeded, and the noise began again. "Who is there?" she said, in a tone of alarm.

"It is I, Louise," replied the well-known voice of the king.

"You! you!" cried the young girl, who for a moment fancied herself under the influence of a dream. "But where? You, sire?"

"Here," replied the king, opening one of the folds of the screen, and appearing like a ghost at the end of the room.

La Valliere uttered a loud cry, and fell trembling into an armchair, as the king advanced respectfully towards her.