

Chapter 35

The Apparition.

La Valliere very soon recovered from her surprise, for, owing to his respectful bearing, the king inspired her with more confidence by his presence than his sudden appearance had deprived her of. But, as he noticed that which made La Valliere most uneasy was the means by which he had effected an entrance into her room, he explained to her the system of the staircase concealed by the screen, and strongly disavowed the notion of his being a supernatural appearance.

"Oh, sire!" said La Valliere, shaking her fair head with a most engaging smile, "present or absent, you do not appear to my mind more at one time than at another."

"Which means, Louise - "

"Oh, what you know so well, sire; that there is not one moment in which the poor girl whose secret you surprised at Fontainebleau, and whom you came to snatch from the foot of the cross itself, does not think of you."

"Louise, you overwhelm me with joy and happiness."

La Valliere smiled mournfully, and continued: "But, sire, have you reflected that your ingenious invention could not be of the slightest

service to us?"

"Why so? Tell me, - I am waiting most anxiously."

"Because this room may be subject to being searched at any moment of the day. Madame herself may, at any time, come here accidentally; my companions run in at any moment they please. To fasten the door on the inside, is to denounce myself as plainly as if I had written above, 'No admittance, - the king is within!' Even now, sire, at this very moment, there is nothing to prevent the door opening, and your majesty being seen here."

"In that case," said the king, laughingly, "I should indeed be taken for a phantom, for no one can tell in what way I came here. Besides, it is only spirits that can pass through brick walls, or floors and ceilings."

"Oh, sire, reflect for a moment how terrible the scandal would be! Nothing equal to it could ever have been previously said about the maids of honor, poor creatures! whom evil report, however, hardly ever spares."

"And your conclusion from all this, my dear Louise, - come, explain yourself."

"Alas! it is a hard thing to say - but your majesty must suppress staircase plots, surprises and all; for the evil consequences which would result from your being found here would be far greater than our happiness

in seeing each other."

"Well, Louise," replied the king, tenderly, "instead of removing this staircase by which I have ascended, there is a far more simple means, of which you have not thought."

"A means - another means!"

"Yes, another. Oh, you do not love me as I love you, Louise, since my invention is quicker than yours."

She looked at the king, who held out his hand to her, which she took and gently pressed between her own.

"You were saying," continued the king, "that I shall be detected coming here, where any one who pleases can enter."

"Stay, sire; at this very moment, even while you are speaking about it, I tremble with dread of your being discovered."

"But you would not be found out, Louise, if you were to descend the staircase which leads to the room underneath."

"Oh, sire! what do you say?" cried Louise, in alarm.

"You do not quite understand me, Louise, since you get offended at my

very first word; first of all, do you know to whom the apartments underneath belong?"

"To M. de Guiche, sire, I believe."

"Not at all; they are M. de Saint-Aignan's."

"Are you sure?" cried La Valliere; and this exclamation which escaped from the young girl's joyous heart made the king's heart throb with delight.

"Yes, to Saint-Aignan, _our friend_," he said.

"But, sire," returned La Valliere, "I cannot visit M. de Saint-Aignan's rooms any more than I could M. de Guiche's. It is impossible – impossible."

"And yet, Louise, I should have thought that, under the safe-conduct of the king, you would venture anything."

"Under the safe-conduct of the king," she said, with a look full of tenderness.

"You have faith in my word, I hope, Louise?"

"Yes, sire, when you are not present; but when you are present, - when

you speak to me, - when I look upon you, I have faith in nothing."

"What can possibly be done to reassure you?"

"It is scarcely respectful, I know, to doubt the king, but - for me - you are not the king."

"Thank Heaven! - I, at least, hope so most devoutly; you see how anxiously I am trying to find or invent a means of removing all difficulty. Stay; would the presence of a third person reassure you?"

"The presence of M. de Saint-Aignan would, certainly."

"Really, Louise, you wound me by your suspicions."

Louise did not answer, she merely looked steadfastly at him with that clear, piercing gaze which penetrates the very heart, and said softly to herself, "Alas! alas! it is not you of whom I am afraid, - it is not you upon whom my doubts would fall."

"Well," said the king, sighing, "I agree; and M. de Saint-Aignan, who enjoys the inestimable privilege of reassuring you, shall always be present at our interviews, I promise you."

"You promise that, sire?"

"Upon my honor as a gentleman; and you, on your side - "

"Oh, wait, sire, that is not all yet; for such conversations ought, at least, to have a reasonable motive of some kind for M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Dear Louise, every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours, and my only study is to equal you on that point. It shall be just as you wish: therefore our conversations shall have a reasonable motive, and I have already hit upon one; so that from to-morrow, if you like - "

"To-morrow?"

"Do you meant that that is not soon enough?" exclaimed the king, caressing La Valliere's hand between his own."

At this moment the sound of steps was heard in the corridor.

"Sire! sire!" cried La Valliere, "some one is coming; do you hear? Oh, fly! fly! I implore you."

The king made but one bound from the chair where he was sitting to his hiding-place behind the screen. He had barely time; for as he drew one of the folds before him, the handle of the door was turned, and Montalais appeared at the threshold. As a matter of course she entered quite naturally, and without any ceremony, for she knew perfectly well that to knock at the door beforehand would be showing a suspicion towards La

Valliere which would be displeasing to her. She accordingly entered, and after a rapid glance round the room, in the brief course of which she observed two chairs very close to each other, she was so long in shutting the door, which seemed to be difficult to close, one can hardly tell how or why, that the king had ample time to raise the trap-door, and to descend again to Saint-Aignan's room.

"Louise," she said to her, "I want to talk to you, and seriously, too."

"Good heavens! my dear Aure, what is the matter now?"

"The matter is, that Madame suspects everything."

"Explain yourself."

"Is there any occasion for us to enter into explanations, and do you not understand what I mean? Come, you must have noticed the fluctuations in Madame's humor during several days past; you must have noticed how she first kept you close beside her, then dismissed you, and then sent for you again."

"Yes, I have noticed it, of course."

"Well, it seems Madame has now succeeded in obtaining sufficient information, for she has now gone straight to the point, as there is nothing further left in France to withstand the torrent which sweeps

away all obstacles before it; you know what I mean by the torrent?"

La Valliere hid her face in her hands.

"I mean," continued Montalais, pitilessly, "that torrent which burst through the gates of the Carmelites of Chaillot, and overthrew all the prejudices of the court, as well at Fontainebleau as at Paris."

"Alas! alas!" murmured La Valliere, her face still covered by her hands, and her tears streaming through her fingers.

"Oh, don't distress yourself in that manner, or you have only heard half of your troubles."

"In Heaven's name," exclaimed the young girl, in great anxiety, "what is the matter?"

"Well, then, this is how the matter stands: Madame, who can no longer rely upon any further assistance in France; for she has, one after the other, made use of the two queens, of Monsieur, and the whole court, too, now bethinks herself of a certain person who has certain pretended rights over you."

La Valliere became as white as a marble statue.

"This person," continued Madame, "is not in Paris at this moment; but, if

I am not mistaken, is, just now, in England."

"Yes, yes," breathed La Valliere, almost overwhelmed with terror.

"And is to be found, I think, at the court of Charles II.; am I right?"

"Yes."

"Well, this evening a letter has been dispatched by Madame to Saint James's, with directions for the courier to go straight to Hampton Court, which I believe is one of the royal residences, situated about a dozen miles from London."

"Yes, well?"

"Well; as Madame writes regularly to London once a fortnight, and as the ordinary courier left for London not more than three days ago, I have been thinking that some serious circumstance alone could have induced her to write again so soon, for you know she is a very indolent correspondent."

"Yes."

"This letter has been written, therefore, something tells me so, at least, on your account."

"On my account?" repeated the unhappy girl, mechanically.

"And I, who saw the letter lying on Madame's desk before she sealed it, fancied I could read - "

"What did you fancy you could read?"

"I might possibly have been mistaken, though - "

"Tell me, - what was it?"

"The name of Bragelonne."

La Valliere rose hurriedly from her chair, a prey to the most painful agitation. "Montalais," she said, her voice broken by sobs, "all my smiling dreams of youth and innocence have fled already. I have nothing now to conceal, either from you or any one else. My life is exposed to every one's inspection, and can be opened like a book, in which all the world can read, from the king himself to the first passer-by. Aure, dearest Aure, what can I do - what will become of me?"

Montalais approached close to her, and said, "Consult your own heart, of course."

"Well; I do not love M. de Bragelonne; when I say I do not love him, understand that I love him as the most affectionate sister could love the

best of brothers, but that is not what he requires, nor what I promised him."

"In fact, you love the king," said Montalais, "and that is a sufficiently good excuse."

"Yes, I do love the king," hoarsely murmured the young girl, "and I have paid dearly enough for pronouncing those words. And now, Montalais, tell me - what can you do either for me, or against me, in my position?"

"You must speak more clearly still."

"What am I to say, then?"

"And so you have nothing very particular to tell me?"

"No!" said Louise, in astonishment.

"Very good; and so all you have to ask me is my advice respecting M. Raoul?"

"Nothing else."

"It is a very delicate subject," replied Montalais.

"No, it is nothing of the kind. Ought I to marry him in order to keep

the promise I made, or ought I continue to listen to the king?"

"You have really placed me in a very difficult position," said Montalais, smiling; "you ask me if you ought to marry Raoul, whose friend I am, and whom I shall mortally offend in giving my opinion against him; and then, you ask me if you should cease to listen to the king, whose subject I am, and whom I should offend if I were to advise you in a particular way. Ah, Louise, you seem to hold a difficult position at a very cheap rate."

"You have not understood me, Aure," said La Valliere, wounded by the slightly mocking tone of her companion; "if I were to marry M. de Bragelonne, I should be far from bestowing on him the happiness he deserves; but, for the same reason, if I listen to the king he would become the possessor of one indifferent in very many aspects, I admit, but one whom his affection confers an appearance of value. What I ask you, then, is to tell me some means of disengaging myself honorably either from the one or from the other; or rather, I ask you, from which side you think I can free myself most honorably."

"My dear Louise," replied Montalais, after a pause, "I am not one of the seven wise men of Greece, and I have no perfectly invariable rules of conduct to govern me; but, on the other hand, I have a little experience, and I can assure you that no woman ever asks for advice of the nature which you have just asked me, without being in a terrible state of embarrassment. Besides, you have made a solemn promise, which every principle of honor requires you to fulfil; if, therefore, you are

embarrassed, in consequence of having undertaken such an engagement, it is not a stranger's advice (every one is a stranger to a heart full of love), it is not my advice, I repeat, that can extricate you from your embarrassment. I shall not give it you, therefore; and for a greater reason still - because, were I in your place, I should feel much more embarrassed after the advice than before it. All I can do is, to repeat what I have already told you; shall I assist you?"

"Yes, yes."

"Very well; that is all. Tell me in what way you wish me to help you; tell me for and against whom, - in this way we shall not make any blunders."

"But first of all," said La Valliere, pressing her companion's hand, "for whom or against whom do you decide?"

"For you, if you are really and truly my friend."

"Are you not Madame's confidant?"

"A greater reason for being of service to you; if I were not to know what is going on in that direction I should not be of any service at all, and consequently you would not obtain any advantage from my acquaintance. Friendships live and thrive upon a system of reciprocal benefits."

"The result is, then, that you will remain at the same time Madame's friend also?"

"Evidently. Do you complain of that?"

"I hardly know," sighed La Valliere, thoughtfully, for this cynical frankness appeared to her an offense both to the woman and the friend.

"All well and good, then," said Montalais, "for if you did, you would be very foolish."

"You wish to serve me, then?"

"Devotedly - if you will serve me in return."

"One would almost say that you do not know my heart," said La Valliere, looking at Montalais with her eyes wide open.

"Why, the fact is, that since we have belonged to the court, my dear Louise, we are very much changed."

"In what way?"

"It is very simple. Were you the second queen of France yonder, at Blois?"

La Valliere hung down her head, and began to weep. Montalais looked at her in an indefinable manner, and murmured "Poor girl!" and then, adding, "Poor king!" she kissed Louise on the forehead, and returned to her apartment, where Malicorne was waiting for her.