

Chapter 36

The Portrait.

In that malady which is termed love the paroxysms succeed each other at intervals, ever accelerating from the moment the disease declares itself. By and by, the paroxysms are less frequent, in proportion as the cure approaches. This being laid down as a general axiom, and as the leading article of a particular chapter, we will now proceed with our recital. The next day, the day fixed by the king for the first conversation in Saint-Aignan's room, La Valliere, on opening one of the folds of the screen, found upon the floor a letter in the king's handwriting. The letter had been passed, through a slit in the floor, from the lower apartment to her own. No indiscreet hand or curious gaze could have brought or did bring this single paper. This, too, was one of Malicorne's ideas. Having seen how very serviceable Saint-Aignan would become to the king on account of his apartment, he did not wish that the courtier should become still more indispensable as a messenger, and so he had, on his own private account, reserved this last post for himself. La Valliere most eagerly read the letter, which fixed two o'clock that same afternoon for the rendezvous, and which indicated the way of raising the trap-door which was constructed out of the flooring. "Make yourself look as beautiful as you can," added the postscript of the letter, words which astonished the young girl, but at the same time reassured her.

The hours passed away very slowly, but the time fixed, however, arrived at last. As punctual as the priestess Hero, Louise lifted up the trap-

door at the last stroke of the hour of two, and found the king on the steps, waiting for her with the greatest respect, in order to give her his hand to descend. The delicacy and deference shown in this attention affected her very powerfully. At the foot of the staircase the two lovers found the comte, who, with a smile and a low reverence distinguished by the best taste, expressed his thanks to La Valliere for the honor she conferred upon him. Then turning towards the king, he said:

"Sire, our man is here." La Valliere looked at the king with some uneasiness.

"Mademoiselle," said the king, "if I have begged you to do me the honor of coming down here, it was from an interested motive. I have procured a most admirable portrait painter, who is celebrated for the fidelity of his likenesses, and I wish you to be kind enough to authorize him to paint yours. Besides, if you positively wish it, the portrait shall remain in your own possession." La Valliere blushed. "You see," said the king to her, "we shall not be three as you wished, but four instead. And, so long as we are not alone, there can be as many present as you please." La Valliere gently pressed her royal lover's hand.

"Shall we pass into the next room, sire?" said Saint-Aignan, opening the door to let his guests precede him. The king walked behind La Valliere, and fixed his eyes lingeringly and passionately upon that neck as white as snow, upon which her long fair ringlets fell in heavy masses. La Valliere was dressed in a thick silk robe of pearl gray color, with a

tinge of rose, with jet ornaments, which displayed to greater effect the dazzling purity of her skin, holding in her slender and transparent hands a bouquet of heartsease, Bengal roses, and clematis, surrounded with leaves of the tenderest green, above which uprose, like a tiny goblet spilling magic influence a Haarlem tulip of gray and violet tints of a pure and beautiful species, which had cost the gardener five years' toil of combinations, and the king five thousand francs. Louis had placed this bouquet in La Valliere's hand as he saluted her. In the room, the door of which Saint-Aignan had just opened, a young man was standing, dressed in a purple velvet jacket, with beautiful black eyes and long brown hair. It was the painter; his canvas was quite ready, and his palette prepared for use.

He bowed to La Valliere with the grave curiosity of an artist who is studying his model, saluted the king discreetly, as if he did not recognize him, and as he would, consequently, have saluted any other gentleman. Then, leading Mademoiselle de la Valliere to the seat he had arranged for her, he begged her to sit down.

The young girl assumed an attitude graceful and unrestrained, her hands occupied and her limbs reclining on cushions; and in order that her gaze might not assume a vague or affected expression, the painter begged her to choose some kind of occupation, so as to engage her attention; whereupon Louis XIV., smiling, sat down on the cushions at La Valliere's feet; so that she, in the reclining posture she had assumed, leaning back in the armchair, holding her flowers in her hand, and he, with his eyes

raised towards her and fixed devouringly on her face - they, both together, formed so charming a group, that the artist contemplated painting it with professional delight, while on his side, Saint-Aignan regarded them with feelings of envy. The painter sketched rapidly; and very soon, beneath the earliest touches of the brush, there started into life, out of the gray background, the gentle, poetry-breathing face, with its soft calm eyes and delicately tinted cheeks, enframed in the masses of hair which fell about her neck. The lovers, however, spoke but little, and looked at each other a great deal; sometimes their eyes became so languishing in their gaze, that the painter was obliged to interrupt his work in order to avoid representing an Erycina instead of La Valliere. It was on such occasions that Saint-Aignan came to the rescue, and recited verses, or repeated one of those little tales such as Patru related, and Tallemant des Reaux wrote so cleverly. Or, it might be that La Valliere was fatigued, and the sitting was, therefore, suspended for awhile; and, immediately, a tray of precious porcelain laden with the most beautiful fruits which could be obtained, and rich wines distilling their bright colors in silver goblets, beautifully chased, served as accessories to the picture of which the painter could but retrace the most ephemeral resemblance.

Louis was intoxicated with love, La Valliere with happiness, Saint-Aignan with ambition, and the painter was storing up recollections for his old age. Two hours passed away in this manner, and four o'clock having struck, La Valliere rose, and made a sign to the king. Louis also rose, approached the picture, and addressed a few flattering remarks to the

painter. Saint-Aignan also praised the picture, which, as he pretended, was already beginning to assume an accurate resemblance. La Valliere in her turn, blushing, thanked the painter and passed into the next room, where the king followed her, after having previously summoned Saint-Aignan.

"Will you not come to-morrow?" he said to La Valliere.

"Oh! sire, pray think that some one will be sure to come to my room, and will not find me there."

"Well?"

"What will become of me in that case?"

"You are very apprehensive, Louise."

"But at all events, suppose Madame were to send for me?"

"Oh!" replied the king, "will the day never come when you yourself will tell me to brave everything so that I may not have to leave you again?"

"On that day, sire, I shall be quite out of my mind, and you must not believe me."

"To-morrow, Louise."

La Valliere sighed, but, without the courage to oppose her royal lover's wish, she repeated, "To-morrow, then, since you desire it, sire," and with these words she ran lightly up the stairs, and disappeared from her lover's gaze.

"Well, sire?" inquired Saint-Aignan, when she had left.

"Well, Saint-Aignan, yesterday I thought myself the happiest of men."

"And does your majesty, then, regard yourself to-day," said the comte, smiling, "as the unhappiest of men?"

"No; but my love for her is an unquenchable thirst; in vain do I drink, in vain do I swallow the drops of water which your industry procures for me; the more I drink, the more unquenchable it becomes."

"Sire, that is in some degree your own fault, and your majesty alone has made the position such as it is."

"You are right."

"In that case, therefore, the means to be happy, is to fancy yourself satisfied, and to wait."

"Wait! you know that word, then?"

"There, there, sire - do not despair: I have already been at work on your behalf - I have still other resources in store." The king shook his head in a despairing manner.

"What, sire! have you not been satisfied hitherto?"

"Oh! yes, indeed, yes, my dear Saint-Aignan; but invent, for Heaven's sake, invent some further project yet."

"Sire, I undertake to do my best, and that is all that any one can do."

The king wished to see the portrait again, as he was unable to see the original. He pointed out several alterations to the painter and left the room, and then Saint-Aignan dismissed the artist. The easel, paints, and painter himself, had scarcely gone, when Malicorne showed his head in the doorway. He was received by Saint-Aignan with open arms, but still with a little sadness, for the cloud which had passed across the royal sun, veiled, in its turn, the faithful satellite, and Malicorne at a glance perceived the melancholy that brooded on Saint-Aignan's face.

"Oh, monsieur le comte," he said, "how sad you seem!"

"And good reason too, my dear Monsieur Malicorne. Will you believe that the king is still dissatisfied?"

"With his staircase, do you mean?"

"Oh, no; on the contrary, he is delighted with the staircase."

"The decorations of the apartments, I suppose, don't please him."

"Oh! he has not even thought of that. No, indeed, it seems that what has dissatisfied the king - "

"I will tell you, monsieur le comte, - he is dissatisfied at finding himself the fourth person at a rendezvous of this kind. How is it possible you could not have guessed that?"

"Why, how is it likely I could have done so, dear M. Malicorne, when I followed the king's instructions to the very letter?"

"Did his majesty really insist on your being present?"

"Positively."

"And also required that the painter, whom I met downstairs just now, should be here, too?"

"He insisted upon it."

"In that case, I can easily understand why his majesty is dissatisfied."

"What! dissatisfied that I have so punctually and so literally obeyed his orders? I don't understand you."

Malicorne began to scratch his ear, as he asked, "What time did the king fix for the rendezvous in your apartments?"

"Two o'clock."

"And you were waiting for the king?"

"Ever since half-past one; it would have been a fine thing, indeed, to have been unpunctual with his majesty."

Malicorne, notwithstanding his respect for Saint-Aignan, could not help smiling. "And the painter," he said, "did the king wish him to be here at two o'clock, also?"

"No; but I had him waiting here from midday. Far better, you know, for a painter to be kept waiting a couple of hours than the king a single minute."

Malicorne began to laugh aloud. "Come, dear Monsieur Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, "laugh less at me, and speak a little more freely, I beg."

"Well, then, monsieur le comte, if you wish the king to be a little more

satisfied the next time he comes - "

"_'Ventre saint-gris!_' as his grandfather used to say; of course I wish it."

"Well, all you have to do is, when the king comes to-morrow, to be obliged to go away on a most pressing matter of business, which cannot possibly be postponed, and stay away for twenty minutes."

"What! leave the king alone for twenty minutes?" cried Saint-Aignan, in alarm.

"Very well, do as you like; don't pay any attention to what I say," said Malicorne, moving towards the door.

"Nay, nay, dear Monsieur Malicorne; on the contrary, go on - I begin to understand you. But the painter - "

"Oh! the painter must be half an hour late."

"Half an hour - do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do, decidedly."

"Very well, then, I will do as you tell me."

"And my opinion is, that you will be doing perfectly right. Will you allow me to call upon you for the latest news to-morrow?"

"Of course."

"I have the honor to be your most respectful servant, M. de Saint-Aignan," said Malicorne, bowing profoundly and retiring from the room backwards.

"There is no doubt that fellow has more invention than I have," said Saint-Aignan, as if compelled by his conviction to admit it.