

## Chapter 39

### Saint-Aignan Follows Malicorne's Advice.

The king most assiduously followed the progress which was made in La Valliere's portrait; and did so with a care and attention arising as much from a desire that it should resemble her as from the wish that the painter should prolong the period of its completion as much as possible. It was amusing to observe him follow the artist's brush, awaiting the completion of a particular plan, or the result of a combination of colors, and suggesting various modifications to the painter, which the latter consented to adopt with the most respectful docility. And again, when the artist, following Malicorne's advice, was a little late in arriving, and when Saint-Aignan had been obliged to be absent for some time, it was interesting to observe, though no one witnessed them, those moments of silence full of deep expression, which united in one sigh two souls most disposed to understand each other, and who by no means objected to the quiet meditation they enjoyed together. The minutes flew rapidly by, as if on wings, and as the king drew closer to Louise and bent his burning gaze upon her, a noise was suddenly heard in the ante-room. It was the artist, who had just arrived; Saint-Aignan, too, had returned, full of apologies; and the king began to talk and La Valliere to answer him very hurriedly, their eyes revealing to Saint-Aignan that they had enjoyed a century of happiness during his absence. In a word, Malicorne, philosopher that he was, though he knew it not, had learned how to inspire the king with an appetite in the midst of plenty, and with desire in the assurance of possession. La Valliere's fears of

interruption had never been realized, and no one imagined she was absent from her apartment two or three hours every day; she pretended that her health was very uncertain; those who went to her room always knocked before entering, and Malicorne, the man of so many ingenious inventions, had constructed an acoustic piece of mechanism, by means of which La Valliere, when in Saint-Aignan's apartment, was always forewarned of any visits which were paid to the room she usually inhabited. In this manner, therefore, without leaving her room, and having no \_confidante\_, she was able to return to her apartment, thus removing by her appearance, a little tardy perhaps, the suspicions of the most determined skeptics. Malicorne having asked Saint-Aignan the next morning what news he had to report, the latter was obliged to confess that the quarter of an hour's liberty had made the king in most excellent humor. "We must double the dose," replied Malicorne, "but by insensible degrees; wait until they seem to wish it."

They were so desirous for it, however, that on the evening of the fourth day, at the moment when the painter was packing up his implements, during Saint-Aignan's continued absence, Saint-Aignan on his return noticed upon La Valliere's face a shade of disappointment and vexation, which she could not conceal. The king was less reserved, and exhibited his annoyance by a very significant shrug of the shoulders, at which La Valliere could not help blushing. "Very good!" thought Saint-Aignan to himself; "M. Malicorne will be delighted this evening;" as he, in fact, was, when it was reported to him.

"It is very evident," he remarked to the comte, "that Mademoiselle de la Valliere hoped that you would be at least ten minutes later."

"And the king that I should be half an hour later, dear Monsieur Malicorne."

"You would show but very indifferent devotion to the king," replied the latter, "if you were to refuse his majesty that half-hour's satisfaction."

"But the painter," objected Saint-Aignan.

"\_I\_ will take care of him," said Malicorne, "only I must study faces and circumstances a little better before I act; those are my magical inventions and contrivances; and while sorcerers are enabled by means of their astrolabe to take the altitude of the sun, moon, and stars, I am satisfied merely by looking into people's faces, in order to see if their eyes are encircled with dark lines, and if the mouth describes a convex or concave arc."

And the cunning Malicorne had every opportunity of watching narrowly and closely, for the very same evening the king accompanied the queen to Madame's apartments, and made himself so remarked by his serious face and

his deep sigh, and looked at La Valliere with such a languishing expression, that Malicorne said to Montalais during the evening: "To-

morrow." And he went off to the painter's house in the street of the Jardins Saint-Paul to request him to postpone the next sitting for a couple of days. Saint-Aignan was not within, when La Valliere, who was now quite familiar with the lower story, lifted up the trap-door and descended. The king, as usual was waiting for her on the staircase, and held a bouquet in his hand; as soon as he saw her, he clasped her tenderly in his arms. La Valliere, much moved at the action, looked around the room, but as she saw the king was alone, she did not complain of it. They sat down, the king reclining near the cushions on which Louise was seated, with his head supported by her knees, placed there as in an asylum whence no one could banish him; he gazed ardently upon her, and as if the moment had arrived when nothing could interpose between their two hearts; she, too, gazed with similar passion upon him, and from her eyes, so softly pure, emanated a flame, whose rays first kindled and then inflamed the heart of the king, who, trembling with happiness as Louise's hand rested on his head, grew giddy from excess of joy, and momentarily awaited either the painter's or Saint-Aignan's return to break the sweet illusion. But the door remained closed, and neither Saint-Aignan nor the painter appeared, nor did the hangings even move. A deep mysterious silence reigned in the room - a silence which seemed to influence even the song-birds in their gilded prisons. The king, completely overcome, turned round his head and buried his burning lips in La Valliere's hands, who, herself faint, with excess of emotion, pressed her trembling hands against her lover's lips. Louis threw himself upon his knees, and as La Valliere did not move her head, the king's forehead being within reach of her lips, she furtively passed her lips across the

perfumed locks which caressed her cheeks. The king seized her in his arms, and, unable to resist the temptation, they exchanged their first kiss, that burning kiss, which changes love into delirium. Suddenly, a noise upon the upper floor was heard, which had, in fact, continued, though it had remained unnoticed, for some time; it had at last aroused La Valliere's attention, though but slowly so. As the noise, however, continued, as it forced itself upon the attention, and recalled the poor girl from her dreams of happiness to the sad realities of life, she rose in a state of utter bewilderment, though beautiful in her disorder, saying:

"Some one is waiting for me above. Louis, Louis, do you not hear?"

"Well! and am I not waiting for you, also?" said the king, with infinite tenderness of tone. "Let others henceforth wait for you."

But she gently shook her head, as she replied: "Happiness hidden... power concealed... my pride should be as silent as my heart."

The noise was again resumed.

"I hear Montalais's voice," she said, and she hurried up the staircase; the king followed her, unable to let her leave his sight, and covering her hand with his kisses. "Yes, yes," repeated La Valliere, who had passed half-way through the opening. "Yes, it is Montalais who is calling me; something important must have happened."

"Go then, dearest love," said the king, "but return quickly."

"No, no, not to-day, sire! Adieu! adieu!" she said, as she stooped down once more to embrace her lover - and escaped. Montalais was, in fact, waiting for her, very pale and agitated.

"Quick, quick! he is coming," she said.

"Who - who is coming?"

"Raoul," murmured Montalais.

"It is I - I," said a joyous voice, upon the last steps of the grand staircase.

La Valliere uttered a terrible shriek and threw herself back.

"I am here, dear Louise," said Raoul, running towards her. "I knew but too well that you had not ceased to love me."

La Valliere with a gesture, partly of extreme terror, and partly as if invoking a blessing, attempted to speak, but could not articulate one word. "No, no!" she said, as she fell into Montalais's arms, murmuring, "Do not touch me, do not come near me."

Montalais made a sign to Raoul, who stood almost petrified at the door, and did not even attempt to advance another step into the room. Then, looking towards the side of the room where the screen was, she exclaimed: "Imprudent girl, she has not even closed the trap-door."

And she advanced towards the corner of the room to close the screen, and also, behind the screen, the trap-door. But suddenly the king, who had heard Louise's exclamation, darted through the opening, and hurried forward to her assistance. He threw himself on his knees before her, as he overwhelmed Montalais with questions, who hardly knew where she was. At the moment, however, when the king threw himself on his knees, a cry of utter despair rang through the corridor, accompanied by the sound of retreating footsteps. The king wished to see who had uttered the cry and whose were the footsteps he had heard; and it was in vain that Montalais sought to retain him, for Louis, quitting his hold of La Valliere, hurried towards the door, too late, however, for Raoul was already at a distance, and the king only beheld a shadow that quickly vanished in the silent corridor.