

## Chapter 44

### Two Friends.

The queen looked steadily at Madame de Chevreuse, and said: "I believe you just now made use of the word 'happy' in speaking of me. Hitherto, duchesse, I had thought it impossible that a human creature could anywhere be found more miserable than the queen of France."

"Your afflictions, madame, have indeed been terrible enough. But by the side of those great and grand misfortunes to which we, two old friends, separated by men's malice, were just now alluding, you possess sources of pleasure, slight enough in themselves it may be, but greatly envied by the world."

"What are they?" said Anne of Austria, bitterly. "What can induce you to pronounce the word 'pleasure,' duchesse - you who, just now, admitted that my body and my mind both stood in need of remedies?"

Madame de Chevreuse collected herself for a moment, and then murmured, "How far removed kings are from other people!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they are so far removed from the vulgar herd that they forget that others often stand in need of the bare necessities of life. They are like the inhabitant of the African mountains, who, gazing from

the verdant tableland, refreshed by the rills of melted snow, cannot comprehend that the dwellers in the plains below are perishing from hunger and thirst in the midst of the desert, burnt up by the heat of the sun."

The queen colored, for she now began to perceive the drift of her friend's remark. "It was very wrong," she said, "to have neglected you."

"Oh! madame, I know the king has inherited the hatred his father bore me. The king would exile me if he knew I were in the Palais Royal."

"I cannot say that the king is very well disposed towards you, duchesse," replied the queen; "but I could - secretly, you know - "

The duchesse's disdainful smile produced a feeling of uneasiness in the queen's mind. "Duchesse," she hastened to add, "you did perfectly right to come here, even were it only to give us the happiness of contradicting the report of your death."

"Has it been rumored, then, that I was dead?"

"Everywhere."

"And yet my children did not go into mourning."

"Ah! you know, duchesse, the court is very frequently moving about from

place to place; we see M. Albert de Luynes but seldom, and many things escape our minds in the midst of the preoccupations that constantly beset us."

"Your majesty ought not to have believed the report of my death."

"Why not? Alas! we are all mortal; and you may perceive how rapidly I, your younger sister, as we used formerly to say, am approaching the tomb."

"If your majesty believed me dead, you ought, in that case, to have been astonished not to have received the news."

"Death not unfrequently takes us by surprise, duchesse."

"Oh! your majesty, those who are burdened with secrets such as we have just now discussed must, as a necessity of their nature, satisfy their craving desire to divulge them, and they feel they must gratify that desire before they die. Among the various preparations for their final journey, the task of placing their papers in order is not omitted."

The queen started.

"Your majesty will be sure to learn, in a particular manner, the day of my death."

"In what way?"

"Because your majesty will receive the next day, under several coverings, everything connected with our mysterious correspondence of former times."

"Did you not burn them?" cried Anne, in alarm.

"Traitors only," replied the duchesse, "destroy a royal correspondence."

"Traitors, do you say?"

"Yes, certainly, or rather they pretend to destroy, instead of which they keep or sell it. Faithful friends, on the contrary, most carefully secrete such treasures, for it may happen that some day or other they would wish to seek out their queen in order to say to her: 'Madame, I am getting old; my health is fast failing me; in the presence of the danger of death, for there is the risk for your majesty that this secret may be revealed, take, therefore, this paper, so fraught with menace for yourself, and trust not to another to burn it for you.'"

"What paper do you refer to?"

"As far as I am concerned, I have but one, it is true, but that is indeed most dangerous in its nature."

"Oh! duchesse, tell me what it is."

"A letter, dated Tuesday, the 2d of August, 1644, in which you beg me to go to Noisy-le-Sec, to see that unhappy child. In your own handwriting, madame, there are those words, 'that unhappy child!'"

A profound silence ensued; the queen's mind was busy in the past; Madame de Chevreuse was watching the progress of her scheme. "Yes, unhappy, most unhappy!" murmured Anne of Austria; "how sad the existence he led, poor child, to finish it in so cruel a manner."

"Is he dead?" cried the duchesse suddenly, with a curiosity whose genuine accents the queen instinctively detected.

"He died of consumption, died forgotten, died withered and blighted like the flowers a lover has given to his mistress, which she leaves to die secreted in a drawer where she had hid them from the gaze of others."

"Died!" repeated the duchesse with an air of discouragement, which would have afforded the queen the most unfeigned delight, had it not been tempered in some measure with a mixture of doubt - "Died - at Noisy-le-Sec?"

"Yes, in the arms of his tutor, a poor, honest man, who did not long survive him."

"That can easily be understood; it is so difficult to bear up under the weight of such a loss and such a secret," said Madame de Chevreuse, - the

irony of which reflection the queen pretended not to perceive. Madame de Chevreuse continued: "Well, madame, I inquired some years ago at Noisy-le-Sec about this unhappy child. I was told that it was not believed he was dead, and that was my reason for not having at first condoled with your majesty; for, most certainly, if I could have thought it were true, never should I have made the slightest allusion to so deplorable an event, and thus have re-awakened your majesty's most natural distress."

"You say that it is not believed the child died at Noisy?"

"No, madame."

"What did they say about him, then?"

"They said - but, no doubt, they were mistaken - "

"Nay, speak, speak!"

"They said, that one evening, about the year 1645, a lady, beautiful and majestic in her bearing, which was observed notwithstanding the mask and the mantle that concealed her figure - a lady of rank, of very high rank, no doubt - came in a carriage to the place where the road branches off; the very same spot, you know, where I awaited news of the young prince when your majesty was graciously pleased to send me there."

"Well, well?"

"That the boy's tutor, or guardian, took the child to this lady."

"Well, what next?"

"That both the child and his tutor left that part of the country the very next day."

"There, you see there is some truth in what you relate, since, in point of fact, the poor child died from a sudden attack of illness, which makes the lives of all children, as doctors say, suspended as it were by a thread."

"What your majesty says is quite true; no one knows it better than yourself - no one believes it more strongly than myself. But yet, how strange it is - "

"What can it now be?" thought the queen.

"The person who gave me these details, who was sent to inquire after the child's health - "

"Did you confide such a charge to any one else? Oh, duchesse!"

"Some one as dumb as your majesty, as dumb as myself; we will suppose it was myself, Madame; this some one, some months after, passing through

Touraine - "

"Touraine!"

"Recognized both the tutor and the child, too! I am wrong, thought he recognized them, both living, cheerful, happy, and flourishing, the one in a green old age, the other in the flower of his youth. Judge after that what truth can be attributed to the rumors which are circulated, or what faith, after that, placed in anything that may happen in the world! But I am fatiguing your majesty; it was not my intention, however, to do so, and I will take my leave of you, after renewing to you the assurance of my most respectful devotion."

"Stay, duchesse; let us first talk a little about yourself."

"Of myself, madame! I am not worthy that you should bend your looks upon me."

"Why not, indeed? Are you not the oldest friend I have? Are you angry with me, duchesse?"

"I, indeed! what motive could I have? If I had reason to be angry with your majesty, should I have come here?"

"Duchesse, age is fast creeping on us both; we should be united against that death whose approach cannot be far off."

"You overpower me, madame, with the kindness of your language."

"No one has ever loved or served me as you have done, duchesse."

"Your majesty is too kind in remembering it."

"Not so. Give me a proof of your friendship, duchesse."

"My whole being is devoted to you, madame."

"The proof I require is, that you should ask something of me."

"Ask - "

"Oh, I know you well, - no one is more disinterested, more noble, and truly loyal."

"Do not praise me too highly, madame," said the duchesse, somewhat anxiously.

"I could never praise you as much as you deserve to be praised."

"And yet, age and misfortune effect a terrible change in people, madame."

"So much the better; for the beautiful, the haughty, the adored duchesse

of former days might have answered me ungratefully, 'I do not wish for anything from you.' Heaven be praised! The misfortunes you speak of have indeed worked a change in you, for you will now, perhaps, answer me, 'I accept.'

The duchesse's look and smile soon changed at this conclusion, and she no longer attempted to act a false part.

"Speak, dearest, what do you want?"

"I must first explain to you - "

"Do so unhesitatingly."

"Well, then, your majesty can confer the greatest, the most ineffable pleasure upon me."

"What is it?" said the queen, a little distant in her manner, from an uneasiness of feeling produced by this remark. "But do not forget, my good Chevreuse, that I am quite as much under my son's influence as I was formerly under my husband's."

"I will not be too hard, madame."

"Call me as you used to do; it will be a sweet echo of our happy youth."

"Well, then, my dear mistress, my darling Anne - "

"Do you know Spanish, still?"

"Yes."

"Ask me in Spanish, then."

"Will your majesty do me the honor to pass a few days with me at Dampierre?"

"Is that all?" said the queen, stupefied. "Nothing more than that?"

"Good heavens! can you possibly imagine that, in asking you that, I am not asking you the greatest conceivable favor? If that really be the case, you do not know me. Will you accept?"

"Yes, gladly. And I shall be happy," continued the queen, with some suspicion, "if my presence can in any way be useful to you."

"Useful!" exclaimed the duchesse, laughing; "oh, no, no, agreeable – delightful, if you like; and you promise me, then?"

"I swear it," said the queen, whereupon the duchesse seized her beautiful hand, and covered it with kisses. The queen could not help murmuring to herself, "She is a good-hearted woman, and very generous, too."

"Will your majesty consent to wait a fortnight before you come?"

"Certainly; but why?"

"Because," said the duchesse, "knowing me to be in disgrace, no one would lend me the hundred thousand francs, which I require to put Dampierre into a state of repair. But when it is known that I require that sum for the purpose of receiving your majesty at Dampierre properly, all the money in Paris will be at my disposal."

"Ah!" said the queen, gently nodding her head in sign of intelligence, "a hundred thousand francs! you want a hundred thousand francs to put Dampierre into repair?"

"Quite as much as that."

"And no one will lend you them?"

"No one."

"I will lend them to you, if you like, duchesse."

"Oh, I hardly dare accept such a sum."

"You would be wrong if you did not. Besides, a hundred thousand francs

is really not much. I know but too well that you never set a right value upon your silence and secrecy. Push that table a little towards me, duchesse, and I will write you an order on M. Colbert; no, on M. Fouquet, who is a far more courteous and obliging man."

"Will he pay it, though?"

"If he will not pay it, I will; but it will be the first time he will have refused me."

The queen wrote and handed the duchesse the order, and afterwards dismissed her with a warm embrace.