

## Chapter 53

### A Domiciliary Visit.

The princess, preceding Raoul, led him through the courtyard towards that part of the building La Valliere inhabited, and, ascending the same staircase which Raoul himself had ascended that very morning, she paused at the door of the room in which the young man had been so strangely received by Montalais. The opportunity was remarkably well chosen to carry out the project Madame Henrietta had conceived, for the chateau was empty. The king, the courtiers, and the ladies of the court, had set off for Saint-Germain; Madame Henrietta was the only one who knew of Bragelonne's return, and thinking over the advantages which might be drawn from this return, she had feigned indisposition in order to remain behind. Madame was therefore confident of finding La Valliere's room and Saint-Aignan's apartment perfectly empty. She took a pass-key from her pocket and opened the door of her maid of honor's apartment.

Bragelonne's gaze was immediately fixed upon the interior of the room, which he recognized at once; and the impression which the sight of it produced upon him was torture. The princess looked at him, and her practiced eye at once detected what was passing in the young man's heart.

"You asked for proofs," she said; "do not be astonished, then, if I give you them. But if you do not think you have courage enough to confront them, there is still time to withdraw."

"I thank you, Madame," said Bragelonne; "but I came here to be

convinced. You promised to convince me, - do so."

"Enter, then," said Madame, "and shut the door behind you."

Bragelonne obeyed, and then turned towards the princess, whom he interrogated by a look.

"You know where you are, I suppose?" inquired Madame Henrietta.

"Everything leads me to believe I am in Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room."

"You are."

"But I would observe to your highness, that this room is a room, and is not a proof."

"Wait," said the princess, as she walked to the foot of the bed, folded up the screen into its several compartments, and stooped down towards the floor. "Look here," she continued; "stoop down and lift up this trap-door yourself."

"A trap-door!" said Raoul, astonished; for D'Artagnan's words began to return to his memory, and he had an indistinct recollection that D'Artagnan had made use of the same word. He looked, but uselessly, for some cleft or crevice which might indicate an opening or a ring to assist

in lifting up the planking.

"Ah, I forgot," said Madame Henrietta, "I forgot the secret spring; the fourth plank of the flooring, - press on the spot where you will observe a knot in the wood. Those are the instructions; press, vicomte! press, I say, yourself."

Raoul, pale as death, pressed his finger on the spot which had been indicated to him; at the same moment the spring began to work, and the trap rose of its own accord.

"It is ingenious enough, certainly," said the princess; "and one can see that the architect foresaw that a woman's hand only would have to make use of this spring, for see how easily the trap-door opened without assistance."

"A staircase!" cried Raoul.

"Yes, and a very pretty one, too," said Madame Henrietta. "See, vicomte, the staircase has a balustrade, intended to prevent the falling of timid persons, who might be tempted to descend the staircase; and I will risk myself on it accordingly. Come, vicomte, follow me!"

"But before following you, madame, may I ask where this staircase leads to?"

"Ah, true; I forgot to tell you. You know, perhaps, that formerly M. de Saint-Aignan lived in the very next apartment to the king?"

"Yes, Madame, I am aware of that; that was the arrangement, at least, before I left; and more than once I had the honor of visiting his rooms."

"Well, he obtained the king's leave to change his former convenient and beautiful apartment for the two rooms to which this staircase will conduct us, and which together form a lodging for him half the size, and at ten times greater the distance from the king, - a close proximity to whom is by no means disdained, in general, by the gentlemen belonging to the court."

"Very good, Madame," returned Raoul; "but go on, I beg, for I do not understand yet."

"Well, then it accidentally happened," continued the princess, "that M. de Saint-Aignan's apartment is situated underneath the apartments of my maids of honor, and by a further coincidence, exactly underneath the room of La Valliere."

"But what was the motive of this trap-door and this staircase?"

"That I cannot tell you. Would you like to go down to Monsieur de Saint-Aignan's rooms? Perhaps we shall be able to find the solution of the enigma there."

And Madame set the example by going down herself, while Raoul, sighing deeply, followed her. At every step Bragelonne took, he advanced further into that mysterious apartment which had witnessed La Valliere's sighs and still retained the perfume of her presence. Bragelonne fancied he perceived, as he inhaled the atmosphere, that the young girl must have passed through. Then succeeded to these emanations of herself, which he regarded as invisible though certain proofs, flowers she preferred to all others - books of her own selection. If Raoul retained a single doubt on the subject, it would have vanished at the secret harmony of tastes and connection of the mind with the ordinary objects of life. La Valliere, in Bragelonne's eyes, was present there in each article of furniture, in the color of the hangings, in all that surrounded him. Dumb, and now completely overwhelmed, there was nothing further for him now to learn, and he followed his pitiless conductress as blindly as the culprit follows the executioner; while Madame, as cruel as women of overstrung temperaments generally are, did not spare him the slightest detail. But it must be admitted that, notwithstanding the kind of apathy into which he had fallen, none of these details, even had he been left alone, would have escaped him. The happiness of the woman who loves, when that happiness is derived from a rival, is a living torture for a jealous man; but for a jealous man such as Raoul was, for one whose heart for the first time in its existence was being steeped in gall and bitterness, Louise's happiness was in reality an ignominious death, a death of body and soul. He guessed all; he fancied he could see them, with their hands clasped in each other's, their faces drawn close together, and reflected,

side by side, in loving proximity, and they gazed upon the mirrors around them - so sweet an occupation for lovers, who, as they thus see themselves twice over, imprint the picture still more deeply on their memories. He could guess, too, the stolen kiss snatched as they separated from each other's loved society. The luxury, the studied elegance, eloquent of the perfection of indolence, of ease; the extreme care shown, either to spare the loved object every annoyance, or to occasion her a delightful surprise; that might and majesty of love multiplied by the majesty and might of royalty itself, seemed like a death-blow to Raoul. If there be anything which can in any way assuage or mitigate the tortures of jealousy, it is the inferiority of the man who is preferred to yourself; whilst, on the very contrary, if there be one anguish more bitter than another, a misery for which language lacks a word, it is the superiority of the man preferred to yourself, superior, perhaps, in youth, beauty, grace. It is in such moments as these that Heaven almost seems to have taken part against the disdained and rejected lover.

One final pang was reserved for poor Raoul. Madame Henrietta lifted up a silk curtain, and behind the canvas he perceived La Valliere's portrait. Not only the portrait of La Valliere, but of La Valliere radiant with youth, beauty, and happiness, inhaling life and enjoyment at every pore, because at eighteen years of age love itself is life.

"Louise!" murmured Bragelonne, - "Louise! is it true, then? Oh, you have never loved me, for never have you looked at me in that manner." And he

felt as if his heart were crushed within his bosom.

Madame Henrietta looked at him, almost envious of his extreme grief, although she well knew there was nothing to envy in it, and that she herself was as passionately loved by De Guiche as Louise by Bragelonne. Raoul interpreted Madame Henrietta's look.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me, Madame; in your presence I know I ought to have greater self-control. But Heaven grant that you may never be struck by similar misery to that which crushes me at this moment, for you are but a woman, and would not be able to endure so terrible an affliction. Forgive me, I again entreat you, Madame; I am but a man without rank or position, while you belong to a race whose happiness knows no bounds, whose power acknowledges no limit."

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," replied Henrietta, "a mind such as your merits all the consideration and respect which a queen's heart even can bestow. Regard me as your friend, monsieur; and as such, indeed, I would not allow your whole life to be poisoned by perfidy, and covered with ridicule. It was I, indeed, who, with more courage than any of your pretended friends, - I except M. de Guiche, - was the cause of your return from London; it is I, also, who now give you the melancholy proofs, necessary, however, for your cure if you are a lover with courage in his heart, and not a weeping Amadis. Do not thank me; pity me, even, and do not serve the king less faithfully than you have done."

Raoul smiled bitterly. "Ah! true, true; I was forgetting that; the king is my master."

"Your liberty, nay, your very life, is in danger."

A steady, penetrating look informed Madame Henrietta that she was mistaken, and that her last argument was not a likely one to affect the young man. "Take care, Monsieur de Bragelonne," she said, "for if you do not weigh well all your actions, you might throw into an extravagance of wrath a prince whose passions, once aroused, exceed the bounds of reason, and you would thereby involve your friends and family in the deepest distress; you must bend, you must submit, and you must cure yourself."

"I thank you, Madame; I appreciate the advice your royal highness is good enough to give me, and I will endeavor to follow it; but one final word, I beg."

"Name it."

"Should I be indiscreet in asking you the secret of this staircase, of this trap-door; a secret, which, it seems, you have discovered?"

"Nothing more simple. For the purpose of exercising a surveillance over the young girls who are attached to my service, I have duplicate keys of their doors. It seemed very strange to me that M. de Saint-Aignan should change his apartments. It seemed very strange that the king should come



to see M. de Saint-Aignan every day, and, finally, it seemed very strange that so many things should be done during your absence, that the very habits and customs of the court appeared changed. I do not wish to be trifled with by the king, nor to serve as a cloak for his love affairs; for after La Valliere, who weeps incessantly, he will take a fancy to Montalais, who is always laughing; and then to Tonnay-Charente, who does nothing but sing all day; to act such a part as that would be unworthy of me. I thrust aside the scruples which my friendship for you suggested. I discovered the secret. I have wounded your feelings, I know, and I again entreat you to pardon me; but I had a duty to fulfil. I have discharged it. You are now forewarned; the tempest will soon burst; protect yourself accordingly."

"You naturally expect, however, that a result of some kind must follow," replied Bragelonne, with firmness; "for you do not suppose I shall silently accept the shame thus thrust upon me, or the treachery which has been practiced against me?"

"You will take whatever steps in the matter you please, Monsieur Raoul, only do not betray the source whence you derived the truth. That is all I have to ask, - the only price I require for the service I have rendered you."

"Fear nothing, Madame," said Bragelonne, with a bitter smile.

"I bribed the locksmith, in whom the lovers confided. You can just as

well have done so as myself, can you not?"

"Yes, Madame. Your royal highness, however, has no other advice or caution to give me, except that of not betraying you?"

"None."

"I am about, therefore, to beg your royal highness to allow me to remain here for one moment."

"Without me?"

"Oh! no, Madame. It matters very little; for what I have to do can be done in your presence. I only ask one moment to write a line to some one."

"It is dangerous, Monsieur de Bragelonne. Take care."

"No one can possibly know that your royal highness has done me the honor to conduct me here. Besides, I shall sign the letter I am going to write."

"Do as you please, then."

Raoul drew out his tablet, and wrote rapidly on one of the leaves the following words:

"MONSIEUR LE COMTE, - Do not be surprised to find this paper signed by me; the friend I shall very shortly send to call on you will have the honor to explain the object of my visit.

"VICOMTE RAOUL DE BRAGELONNE."

He rolled up the paper, slipped it into the lock of the door which communicated with the room set apart for the two lovers, and satisfied himself that the missive was so apparent that Saint-Aignan could not but see it as he entered; he rejoined the princess, who had already reached the top of the staircase. They then separated, Raoul pretending to thank her highness; Henrietta pitying, or seeming to pity, with all her heart, the wretched young man she had just condemned to such fearful torture.

"Oh!" she said, as she saw him disappear, pale as death, and his eyes bursting with blood, "if I had foreseen this, I would have hid the truth from that poor gentleman."