

Chapter 57

Rivals in Love.

Saint-Aignan had quitted Louis XIV. hardly a couple of hours before; but in the first effervescence of his affection, whenever Louis XIV. was out of sight of La Valliere, he was obliged to talk about her. Besides, the only person with whom he could speak about her at his ease was Saint-Aignan, and thus Saint-Aignan had become an indispensable.

"Ah, is that you, comte?" he exclaimed, as soon as he perceived him, doubly delighted, not only to see him again, but also to get rid of Colbert, whose scowling face always put him out of humor. "So much the better, I am very glad to see you. You will make one of the best traveling party, I suppose?"

"Of what traveling part are you speaking, sire?" inquired Saint-Aignan.

"The one we are making up to go to the *_fete_* the superintendent is about to give at Vaux. Ah! Saint-Aignan, you will, at last, see a *_fete_*, a royal *_fete_*, by the side of which all our amusements at Fontainebleau are petty, contemptible affairs."

"At Vaux! the superintendent going to give a *_fete_* in your majesty's honor? Nothing more than that!"

"'Nothing more than that,' do you say? It is very diverting to find you

treating it with so much disdain. Are you who express such an indifference on the subject, aware, that as soon as it is known that M. Fouquet is going to receive me at Vaux next Sunday week, people will be striving their very utmost to get invited to the _fete?_ I repeat, Saint-Aignan, you shall be one of the invited guests."

"Very well, sire; unless I shall, in the meantime, have undertaken a longer and a less agreeable journey."

"What journey do you allude to?"

"The one across the Styx, sire."

"Bah!" said Louis XIV., laughing.

"No, seriously, sire," replied Saint-Aignan, "I am invited; and in such a way, in truth, that I hardly know what to say, or how to act, in order to refuse the invitation."

"I do not understand you. I know that you are in a poetical vein; but try not to sink from Apollo to Phoebus."

"Very well; if your majesty will deign to listen to me, I will not keep your mind on the rack a moment longer."

"Speak."

"Your majesty knows the Baron du Vallon?"

"Yes, indeed; a good servant to my father, the late king, and an admirable companion at table; for, I think, you are referring to the gentleman who dined with us at Fontainebleau?"

"Precisely so; but you have omitted to add to his other qualifications, sire, that he is a most charming polisher-off of other people."

"What! Does M. du Vallon wish to polish you off?"

"Or to get me killed, which is much the same thing."

"The deuce!"

"Do not laugh, sire, for I am not saying one word beyond the exact truth."

"And you say he wishes to get you killed."

"Such is that excellent person's present idea."

"Be easy; I will defend you, if he be in the wrong."

"Ah! There is an 'if!'"

"Of course; answer me as candidly as if it were some one else's affair instead of your own, my poor Saint-Aignan; is he right or wrong?"

"Your majesty shall be the judge."

"What have you done to him?"

"To him, personally, nothing at all; but, it seems, to one of his friends, I have."

"It is all the same. Is his friend one of the celebrated 'four'?"

"No. It is the son of one of the celebrated 'four,' though."

"What have you done to the son? Come, tell me."

"Why, it seems that I have helped some one to take his mistress from him."

"You confess it, then?"

"I cannot help confessing it, for it is true."

"In that case, you are wrong; and if he were to kill you, he would be doing perfectly right."

"Ah! that is your majesty's way of reasoning, then!"

"Do you think it a bad way?"

"It is a very expeditious way, at all events."

"'Good justice is prompt;' so my grandfather Henry IV. used to say."

"In that case, your majesty will, perhaps, be good enough to sign my adversary's pardon, for he is now waiting for me at the Minimes, for the purpose of putting me out of my misery."

"His name, and a parchment!"

"There is a parchment upon your majesty's table; and for his name - "

"Well, what is it?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne, sire."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne!" exclaimed the king; changing from a fit of laughter to the most profound stupor, and then, after a moment's silence, while he wiped his forehead, which was bedewed with perspiration, he again murmured, "Bragelonne!"

"No other, sire."

"Bragelonne, who was affianced to - "

"Yes, sire."

"But - he has been in London."

"Yes; but I can assure you, sire, he is there no longer."

"Is he in Paris, then?"

"He is at Minimes, sire, where he is waiting for me, as I have already had the honor of telling you."

"Does he know all?"

"Yes; and many things besides. Perhaps your majesty would like to look at the letter I have received from him;" and Saint-Aignan drew from his pocket the note we are already acquainted with. "When your majesty has read the letter, I will tell you how it reached me."

The king read it in a great agitation, and immediately said, "Well?"

"Well, sire; your majesty knows a certain carved lock, closing a certain door of carved ebony, which separates a certain apartment from a certain blue and white sanctuary?"

"Of course; Louise's boudoir."

"Yes, sire. Well, it was in the keyhole of that lock that I found yonder note."

"Who placed it there?"

"Either M. de Bragelonne, or the devil himself; but, inasmuch as the note smells of musk and not of sulphur, I conclude that it must be, not the devil, but M. de Bragelonne."

Louis bent his head, and seemed absorbed in sad and bitter thought. Perhaps something like remorse was at that moment passing through his heart. "The secret is discovered," he said.

"Sire, I shall do my utmost that the secret dies in the breast of the man who possesses it!" said Saint-Aignan, in a tone of bravado, as he moved towards the door; but a gesture of the king made him pause.

"Where are you going?" he inquired.

"Where they await me, sire."

"What for?"

"To fight, in all probability."

"_You_ fight!" exclaimed the king. "One moment, if you please, monsieur le comte!"

Saint-Aignan shook his head, as a rebellious child does, whenever any one interferes to prevent him throwing himself into a well, or playing with a knife. "But, sire," he said.

"In the first place," continued the king. "I want to be enlightened a little further."

"Upon all points, if your majesty will be pleased to interrogate me," replied Saint-Aignan, "I will throw what light I can."

"Who told you that M. de Bragelonne had penetrated into that room?"

"The letter which I found in the keyhole told me."

"Who told you that it was De Bragelonne who put it there?"

"Who but himself would have dared to undertake such a mission?"

"You are right. How was he able to get into your rooms?"

"Ah! that is very serious, inasmuch as all the doors were closed, and my lackey, Basque, had the keys in his pocket."

"Your lackey must have been bribed."

"Impossible, sire; for if he had been bribed, those who did so would not have sacrificed the poor fellow, whom, it is not unlikely, they might want to turn to further use by and by, in showing so clearly that it was he whom they had made use of."

"Quite true. And now I can only form one conjecture."

"Tell me what it is, sire, and we shall see if it is the same that has presented itself to my mind."

"That he effected an entrance by means of the staircase."

"Alas, sire, that seems to me more than probable."

"There is no doubt that some one must have sold the secret of the trap-door."

"Either sold it or given it."

"Why do you make that distinction?"

"Because there are certain persons, sire, who, being above the price of treason, give, and do not sell."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, sire! Your majesty's mind is too clear-sighted not to guess what I mean, and you will save me the embarrassment of naming the person I allude to."

"You are right: you mean Madame; I suppose her suspicions were aroused by your changing your lodgings."

"Madame has keys of the apartments of her maids of honor, and she is powerful enough to discover what no one but yourself could do, or she would not be able to discover anything."

"And you suppose, then, that my sister must have entered into an alliance with Bragelonne, and has informed him of all the details of the affair."

"Possibly even better still, for she perhaps accompanied him there."

"Which way? through your own apartments?"

"You think it impossible, sire? Well, listen to me. Your majesty knows that Madame is very fond of perfumes?"

"Yes, she acquired that taste from my mother."

"Vervain, particularly."

"Yes, it is the scent she prefers to all others."

"Very good, sire! my apartments happen to smell very strongly of vervain."

The king remained silent and thoughtful for a few moments, and then resumed: "But why should Madame take Bragelonne's part against me?"

Saint-Aignan could very easily have replied: "A woman's jealousy!" The king probed his friend to the bottom of his heart to ascertain if he had learned the secret of his flirtation with his sister-in-law. But Saint-Aignan was not an ordinary courtier; he did not lightly run the risk of finding out family secrets; and he was too a friend of the Muses not to think very frequently of poor Ovidius Naso, whose eyes shed so many tears in expiation of his crime for having once beheld something, one hardly knows what, in the palace of Augustus. He therefore passed by Madame's secret very skillfully. But as he had shown no ordinary sagacity in indicating Madame's presence in his rooms in company with Bragelonne, it was necessary, of course, for him to repay with interest the king's _amour propre_, and reply plainly to the question which had been put to him of: "Why has Madame taken Bragelonne's part against me?"

"Why?" replied Saint-Aignan. "Your majesty forgets, I presume, that the Comte de Guiche is the intimate friend of the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"I do not see the connection, however," said the king.

"Ah! I beg your pardon, then, sire; but I thought the Comte de Guiche was a very great friend of Madame's."

"Quite true," the king returned; "there is no occasion to search any further, the blow came from that direction."

"And is not your majesty of opinion that, in order to ward it off, it will be necessary to deal another blow?"

"Yes, but not one of the kind given in the Bois de Vincennes," replied the king.

"You forget, sire," said Saint-Aignan, "that I am a gentleman, and that I have been challenged."

"The challenge neither concerns nor was it intended for you."

"But I am the man, sire, who has been expected at the Minimes, sire, during the last hour and more; and I shall be dishonored if I do not go."

"The first honor and duty of a gentleman is obedience to his sovereign."

"Sire!"

"I order you to remain."

"Sire!"

"Obey, monsieur!"

"As your majesty pleases."

"Besides, I wish to have the whole of this affair explained; I wish to know how it is that I have been so insolently trifled with, as to have the sanctuary of my affections pried into. It is not you, Saint-Aignan, whose business it is to punish those who have acted in this manner, for it is not your honor they have attacked, but my own."

"I implore your majesty not to overwhelm M. de Bragelonne with your wrath, for although in the whole of this affair he may have shown himself deficient in prudence, he has not been so in his feelings of loyalty."

"Enough! I shall know how to decide between the just and the unjust, even in the height of my anger. But take care that not a word of this is breathed to Madame."

"But what am I to do with regard to M. de Bragelonne? He will be seeking me in every direction, and - "

"I shall either have spoken to him, or taken care that he has been spoken to, before the evening is over."

"Let me once more entreat your majesty to be indulgent towards him."

"I have been indulgent long enough, comte," said Louis XIV., frowning severely; "it is now quite time to show certain persons that I am master in my own palace."

The king had hardly pronounced these words, which betokened that a fresh feeling of irritation was mingling with the recollections of old, when an usher appeared at the door of the cabinet. "What is the matter?" inquired the king, "and why do you presume to come when I have not summoned you?"

"Sire," said the usher, "your majesty desired me to permit M. le Comte de la Fere to pass freely on any and every occasion, when he might wish to speak to your majesty."

"Well, monsieur?"

"M. le Comte de la Fere is now waiting to see your majesty."

The king and Saint-Aignan at this reply exchanged a look which betrayed more uneasiness than surprise. Louis hesitated for a moment, but immediately afterwards, seeming to make up his mind, he said:

"Go, Saint-Aignan, and find Louise; inform her of the plot against us; do not let her be ignorant that Madame will return to her system of persecutions against her, and that she has set those to work who would have found it far safer to remain neuter."

"Sire - "

"If Louise gets nervous and frightened, reassure her as much as you can; tell her that the king's affection is an impenetrable shield over her; if, which I suspect is the case, she already knows everything, or if she has already been herself subjected to an attack of some kind or other from any quarter, tell her, be sure to tell her, Saint-Aignan," added the king, trembling with passion, "tell her, I say, that this time, instead of defending her, I will avenge her, and that too so terribly that no one will in future even dare to raise his eyes towards her."

"Is that all, sire?"

"Yes, all. Go as quickly as you can, and remain faithful; for, you who live in the midst of this stake of infernal torments, have not, like myself, the hope of the paradise beyond it."

Saint-Aignan exhausted himself in protestations of devotion, took the king's hand, kissed it, and left the room radiant with delight.