

Chapter 60

Heu! Miser!

"Poor Raoul!" had said Athos. "Poor Raoul!" had said D'Artagnan: and, in point of fact, to be pitied by both these men, Raoul must indeed have been most unhappy. And therefore, when he found himself alone, face to face, as it were, with his own troubles, leaving behind him the intrepid friend and the indulgent father; when he recalled the avowal of the king's affection, which had robbed him of Louise de la Valliere, whom he loved so deeply, he felt his heart almost breaking, as indeed we all have at least once in our lives, at the first illusion destroyed, the first affection betrayed. "Oh!" he murmured, "all is over, then. Nothing is now left me in this world. Nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for. Guiche has told me so, my father has told me so, M. d'Artagnan has told me so. All life is but an idle dream. The future which I have been hopelessly pursuing for the last ten years is a dream! the union of hearts, a dream! a life of love and happiness, a dream! Poor fool that I am," he continued, after a pause, "to dream away my existence aloud, publicly, and in the face of others, friends and enemies - and for what purpose, too? in order that my friends may be saddened by my troubles, and my enemies may laugh at my sorrows. And so my unhappiness will soon become a notorious disgrace, a public scandal; and who knows but that tomorrow I may even be a public laughing-stock?"

And, despite the composure which he had promised his father and

D'Artagnan to observe, Raoul could not resist uttering a few words of darkest menace. "And yet," he continued, "if my name were De Wardes, and if I had the pliancy of character and strength of will of M. d'Artagnan, I should laugh, with my lips at least; I should convince other women that this perfidious girl, honored by the affection I have wasted on her, leaves me only one regret, that of having been abused and deceived by her seemingly modest and irreproachable conduct; a few might perhaps fawn on the king by jesting at my expense; I should put myself on the track of some of those buffoons; I should chastise a few of them, perhaps; the men would fear me, and by the time I had laid three dying or dead at my feet, I should be adored by the women. Yes, yes, that, indeed, would be the proper course to adopt, and the Comte de la Fere himself would not object to it. Has not he also been tried, in his earlier days, in the same manner as I have just been tried myself? Did he not replace affection by intoxication? He has often told me so. Why should I not replace love by pleasure? He must have suffered as much as I suffer, even more - if that is possible. The history of one man is the history of all, a dragging trial, more or less prolonged, more or less bitter - sorrowful. The note of human nature is nothing but one sustained cry. But what are the sufferings of others compared to those from which I am now suffering? Does the open wound in another's breast soften the anguish of the gaping ulcer in our own? Does the blood which is welling from another man's side stanch that which is pouring from our own? Does the general grief of our fellow-creatures lessen our own private and particular woe? No, no, each suffers on his own account, each struggles with his own grief, each sheds his own tears. And besides," he went on, "what has my life

been up to the present moment? A cold, barren, sterile arena, in which I have always fought for others, never for myself. Sometimes for a king, sometimes for a woman. The king has betrayed, the woman disdained me. Miserable, unlucky wretch that I am! Women! Can I not make all expiate the crime of one of their sex? What does that need? To have a heart no longer, or to forget that I ever had one; to be strong, even against weakness itself; to lean always, even when one feels that the support is giving way. What is needed to attain, or succeed in all that? To be young, handsome, strong, valiant, rich. I am, or shall be, all that. But honor?" he still continued, "and what is honor after all? A theory which every man understands in his own way. My father tells me: 'Honor is the consideration of what is due to others, and particularly what is due to oneself.' But Guiche, and Manicamp, and Saint-Aignan particularly, would say to me: 'What's honor? Honor consists in studying and yielding to the passions and pleasures of one's king.' Honor such as that indeed, is easy and productive enough. With honor like that, I can keep my post at the court, become a gentleman of the chamber, and accept the command of a regiment, which may at any time be presented to me. With honor such as that, I can be duke and peer.

"The stain which that woman has stamped upon me, the grief that has broken my heart, the heart of the friend and playmate of her childhood, in no way affects M. de Bragelonne, an excellent officer, a courageous leader, who will cover himself with glory at the first encounter, and who will become a hundred times greater than Mademoiselle de la Valliere is to-day, the mistress of the king - for the king will not marry her - and

the more publicly he will proclaim her as his mistress, the more opaque will grow the shadow of shame he casts upon her face, in the guise of a crown; and in proportion as others despise, as I despise her, I shall be gleaning honors in the field. Alas! we had walked together side by side, she and I, during the earliest, the brightest, the most angelic portion of our existence, hand in hand along the charming path of life, covered with the blossoms of youth; and then, alas! we reach a cross-road, where she separates herself from me, in which we have to follow a different route, whereby we become more and more widely separated from each other. And to attain the end of this path, oh, Heaven! I am now alone, in utter despair, and crushed to the very earth."

Such were the sinister reflections in which Raoul indulged, when his foot mechanically paused at the door of his own dwelling. He had reached it without remarking the streets through which he passed, without knowing how he had come; he pushed open the door, continued to advance, and ascended the staircase. The staircase, as in most of the houses at that period, was very dark, and the landings most obscure. Raoul lived on the first floor; he paused in order to ring. Olivain appeared, took his sword and cloak from his hands; Raoul himself opened the door which, from the ante-chamber, led into a small _salon_, richly furnished enough for the _salon_ of a young man, and completely filled with flowers by Olivain, who, knowing his master's tastes, had shown himself studiously attentive in gratifying them, without caring whether his master perceived his attention or not. There was a portrait of La Valliere in the _salon_, which had been drawn by herself and given by her to Raoul. This

portrait, fastened above a large easy chair covered with dark colored damask, was the first point towards which Raoul bent his steps - the first object on which he fixed his eyes. It was, moreover, Raoul's usual habit to do so; every time he entered his room, this portrait, before anything else, attracted his attention. This time, as usual, he walked straight up to the portrait, placed his knees upon the arm chair, and paused to look at it sadly. His arms were crossed upon his breast, his head slightly thrown back, his eyes filled with tears, his mouth worked into a bitter smile. He looked at the portrait of the one he had so tenderly loved; and then all that he had said passed before his mind again, all that he had suffered seemed again to assail his heart; and, after a long silence, he murmured for the third time, "Miserable, unhappy wretch that I am!"

He had hardly pronounced these words, when he heard the sound of a sigh and a groan behind him. He turned sharply round and perceived, in the angle of the _salon_, standing up, a bending veiled female figure, which he had been the means of concealing behind the door as he opened it, and which he had not perceived as he entered. He advanced towards the figure, whose presence in his room had not been announced to him; and as he bowed, and inquired at the same moment who she was, she suddenly raised her head, and removed the veil from her face, revealing her pale and sorrow-stricken features. Raoul staggered back as if he had seen a ghost.

"Louise!" he cried, in a tone of such absolute despair, one could hardly

have thought the human voice was capable of so desponding a cry, without the snapping of the human heart.