

Chapter 61

Wounds within Wounds.

Mademoiselle de la Valliere - for it was indeed she - advanced a few steps towards him. "Yes - Louise," she murmured.

But this interval, short as it had been, was quite sufficient for Raoul to recover himself. "You, mademoiselle?" he said; and then added, in an indefinable tone, "You here!"

"Yes, Raoul," the young girl replied, "I have been waiting for you."

"I beg your pardon. When I came into the room I was not aware - "

"I know - but I entreated Olivain not to tell you - " She hesitated; and as Raoul did not attempt to interrupt her, a moment's silence ensued, during which the sound of their throbbing hearts might have been heard, not in unison with each other, but the one beating as violently as the other. It was for Louise to speak, and she made an effort to do so.

"I wished to speak to you," she said. "It was absolutely necessary that I should see you - myself - alone. I have not hesitated to adopt a step which must remain secret; for no one, except yourself, could understand my motive, Monsieur de Bragelonne."

"In fact, mademoiselle," Raoul stammered out, almost breathless from

emotion, "as far as I am concerned, and despite the good opinion you have of me, I confess - "

"Will you do me the great kindness to sit down and listen to me?" said Louise, interrupting him with her soft, sweet voice.

Bragelonne looked at her for a moment; then mournfully shaking his head, he sat, or rather fell down on a chair. "Speak," he said.

She cast a glance all round her. This look was a timid entreaty, and implored secrecy far more effectually than her expressed words had done a few minutes before. Raoul rouse, and went to the door, which he opened. "Olivain," he said, "I am not within for any one." And then, turning towards Louise, he added, "Is not that what you wished?"

Nothing could have produced a greater effect upon Louise than these few words, which seemed to signify, "You see that I still understand you." She passed a handkerchief across her eyes, in order to remove a rebellious tear which she could not restrain; and then, having collected herself for a moment, she said, "Raoul, do not turn your kind, frank look away from me. You are not one of those men who despise a woman for having given her heart to another, even though her affection might render him unhappy, or might wound his pride." Raoul did not reply.

"Alas!" continued La Valliere, "it is only too true, my cause is a bad one, and I cannot tell in what way to begin. It will be better for me, I

think, to relate to you, very simply, everything that has befallen me. As I shall speak but the pure and simple truth, I shall always find my path clear before me in spite of the obscurity and obstacles I have to brave in order to solace my heart, which is full to overflowing, and wishes to pour itself out at your feet."

Raoul continued to preserve the same unbroken silence. La Valliere looked at him with an air that seemed to say, "Encourage me; for pity's sake, but a single word!" But Raoul did not open his lips; and the young girl was obliged to continue:

"Just now," she said, "M. de Saint-Aignan came to me by the king's directions." She cast down her eyes as she said this; while Raoul, on his side, turned his away, in order to avoid looking at her. "M. de Saint-Aignan came to me from the king," she repeated, "and told me that you knew all;" and she attempted to look Raoul in the face, after inflicting this further wound upon him, in addition to the many others he had already received; but it was impossible to meet Raoul's eyes.

"He told me you were incensed with me - and justly so, I admit."

This time Raoul looked at the young girl, and a smile full of disdain passed across his lips.

"Oh!" she continued, "I entreat you, do not say that you have had any other feeling against me than that of anger merely. Raoul, wait until I

have told you all - wait until I have said to you all that I had to say – all that I came to say."

Raoul, by the strength of his iron will, forced his features to assume a calmer expression, and the disdainful smile upon his lip passed away.

"In the first place," said La Valliere, "in the first place, with my hands raised in entreaty towards you, with my forehead bowed to the ground before you, I entreat you, as the most generous, as the noblest of men, to pardon, to forgive me. If I have left you in ignorance of what was passing in my own bosom, never, at least, would I have consented to deceive you. Oh! I entreat you, Raoul - I implore you on my knees – answer me one word, even though you wrong me in doing so. Better, far better, an injurious word from your lips, than suspicion resting in your heart."

"I admire your subtlety of expression, mademoiselle," said Raoul, making an effort to remain calm. "To leave another in ignorance that you are deceiving him, is loyal; but to deceive him - it seems that would be very wrong, and that you would not do it."

"Monsieur, for a long time I thought that I loved you better than anything else; and so long as I believed in my affection for you, I told you that loved you. I could have sworn it on the altar; but a day came when I was undeceived."

"Well, on that day, mademoiselle, knowing that I still continued to love you, true loyalty of conduct should have forced you to inform me you had ceased to love me."

"But on that day, Raoul - on that day, when I read in the depths of my own heart, when I confessed to myself that you no longer filled my mind entirely, when I saw another future before me than that of being your friend, your life-long companion, your wife - on that day, Raoul, you were not, alas! any more beside me."

"But you knew where I was, mademoiselle; you could have written to me."

"Raoul, I did not dare to do so. Raoul, I have been weak and cowardly. I knew you so thoroughly - I knew how devotedly you loved me, that I trembled at the bare idea of the grief I was about to cause you; and that is so true, Raoul, that this very moment I am now speaking to you, bending thus before you, my heart crushed in my bosom, my voice full of sighs, my eyes full of tears, it is so perfectly true, that I have no other defense than my frankness, I have no other sorrow greater than that which I read in your eyes."

Raoul attempted to smile.

"No!" said the young girl, with a profound conviction, "no, no; you will not do me so foul a wrong as to disguise your feelings before me now! You loved me; you were sure of your affection for me; you did not deceive

yourself; you do not lie to your own heart - whilst I - I - " And pale as death, her arms thrown despairingly above her head, she fell upon her knees.

"Whilst you," said Raoul, "you told me you loved me, and yet you loved another."

"Alas, yes!" cried the poor girl; "alas, yes! I do love another; and that other - oh! for Heaven's sake let me say it, Raoul, for it is my only excuse - that other I love better than my own life, better than my own soul even. Forgive my fault, or punish my treason, Raoul. I came here in no way to defend myself, but merely to say to you: 'You know what it is to love!' - in such a case am I! I love to that degree, that I would give my life, my very soul, to the man I love. If he should ever cease to love me, I shall die of grief and despair, unless Heaven come to my assistance, unless Heaven does show pity upon me. Raoul, I came here to submit myself to your will, whatever it might be - to die, if it were your wish I should die. Kill me, then, Raoul! if in your heart you believe I deserve death."

"Take care, mademoiselle," said Raoul: "the woman who invites death is one who has nothing but her heart's blood to offer to her deceived and betrayed lover."

"You are right," she said.

Raoul uttered a deep sigh, as he exclaimed, "And you love without being able to forget?"

"I love without a wish to forget; without a wish ever to love any one else," replied La Valliere.

"Very well," said Raoul. "You have said to me, in fact, all you had to say; all I could possibly wish to know. And now, mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness, for it is I who have almost been an obstacle in your life; I, too, who have been wrong, for, in deceiving myself, I helped to deceive you."

"Oh!" said La Valliere, "I do not ask you so much as that, Raoul."

"I only am to blame, mademoiselle," continued Raoul, "better informed than yourself of the difficulties of this life, I should have enlightened you. I ought not to have relied upon uncertainty; I ought to have extracted an answer from your heart, whilst I hardly even sought an acknowledgement from your lips. Once more, mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness."

"Impossible, impossible!" she cried, "you are mocking me."

"How, impossible?"

"Yes, it is impossible to be so good, and kind, ah! perfect to such a

degree as that."

"Take care!" said Raoul, with a bitter smile, "for presently you may say perhaps I did not love you."

"Oh! you love me like an affectionate brother; let me hope that, Raoul."

"As a brother! undeceive yourself, Louise. I love you as a lover - as a husband, with the deepest, the truest, the fondest affection."

"Raoul, Raoul!"

"As a brother! Oh, Louise! I love you so deeply, that I would have shed my blood for you, drop by drop; I would, oh! how willingly, have suffered myself to be torn to pieces for your sake, have sacrificed my very future for you. I love you so deeply, Louise, that my heart feels dead and crushed within me, - my faith in human nature all is gone, - my eyes have lost their light; I loved you so deeply, that I now no longer see, think of, care for, anything, either in this world or the next."

"Raoul - dear Raoul! spare me, I implore you!" cried La Valliere. "Oh! if I had but known - "

"It is too late, Louise; you love, you are happy in your affection; I read your happiness through your tears - behind the tears which the loyalty of your nature makes you shed; I feel the sighs your affection

breathes forth. Louise, Louise, you have made me the most abjectly wretched man living; leave me, I entreat you. Adieu! adieu!"

"Forgive me! oh, forgive me, Raoul, for what I have done."

"Have I not done much, much more? _Have I not told you that I love you still?_" She buried her face in her hands.

"And to tell you that - do you hear me, Louise? - to tell you that, at such a moment as this, to tell you that, as I have told you, is to pronounce my own sentence of death. Adieu!" La Valliere held out her hands to him in vain.

"We ought not to see each other again in this world," he said, and as she was on the point of crying out in bitter agony at this remark, he placed his hand on her mouth to stifle the exclamation. She pressed her lips upon it, and fell fainting to the ground. "Olivain," said Raoul, "take this young lady and bear her to the carriage which is waiting for her at the door." As Olivain lifted her up, Raoul made a movement as if to dart towards La Valliere, in order to give her a first and last kiss, but, stopping abruptly, he said, "No! she is not mine. I am no thief - as is the king of France." And he returned to his room, whilst the lackey carried La Valliere, still fainting, to the carriage.