

Chapter 18

King Louis XIV. does not think Mademoiselle de la Valliere either rich enough or pretty enough for a Gentleman of the Rank of the Vicomte de Bragelonne.

Raoul and the Comte de la Fere reached Paris the evening of the same day on which Buckingham had held the conversation with the queen-mother. The count had scarcely arrived, when, through Raoul, he solicited an audience of the king. His majesty had passed a portion of the morning in looking over, with madame and the ladies of the court, various goods of Lyons manufacture, of which he had made his sister-in-law a present. A court dinner had succeeded, then cards, and afterwards, according to his usual custom, the king, leaving the card-tables at eight o'clock, passed into his cabinet in order to work with M. Colbert and M. Fouquet. Raoul entered the ante-chamber at the very moment the two ministers quitted it, and the king, perceiving him through the half-closed door, said, "What do you want, M. de Bragelonne?"

The young man approached: "An audience, sire," he replied, "for the Comte de la Fere, who has just arrived from Blois, and is most anxious to have an interview with your majesty."

"I have an hour to spare between cards and supper," said the king. "Is

the Comte de la Fere at hand?"

"He is below, and awaits your majesty's permission."

"Let him come up at once," said the king, and five minutes afterwards Athos entered the presence of Louis XIV. He was received by the king with that gracious kindness of manner which Louis, with a tact beyond his years, reserved for the purpose of gaining those who were not to be conquered by ordinary favors. "Let me hope, comte," said the king, "that you have come to ask me for something."

"I will not conceal from your majesty," replied the comte, "that I am indeed come for that purpose."

"That is well," said the king, joyously.

"It is not for myself, sire."

"So much the worse; but, at least, I will do for your protege what you refuse to permit me to do for you."

"Your majesty encourages me. I have come to speak on behalf of the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"It is the same as if you spoke on your own behalf, comte."

"Not altogether so, sire. I am desirous of obtaining from your majesty that which I cannot ask for myself. The vicomte thinks of marrying."

"He is still very young; but that does not matter. He is an eminently distinguished man; I will choose a wife for him."

"He has already chosen one, sire, and only awaits your consent."

"It is only a question, then, of signing the marriage-contract?" Athos bowed. "Has he chose a wife whose fortune and position accord with your own anticipation?"

Athos hesitated for a moment. "His affirmed wife is of good birth, but has no fortune."

"That is a misfortune we can remedy."

"You overwhelm me with gratitude, sire; but your majesty will permit me to offer a remark?"

"Do so, comte."

"Your majesty seems to intimate an intention of giving a marriage-portion to this young lady."

"Certainly."

"I should regret, sire, if the step I have taken towards your majesty should be attended by this result."

"No false delicacy, comte; what is the bride's name?"

"Mademoiselle de la Baume le Blanc de la Valliere," said Athos, coldly.

"I seem to know that name," said the king, as if reflecting; "there was a Marquis de la Valliere."

"Yes, sire, it is his daughter."

"But he died, and his widow married again M. de Saint-Remy, I think, steward of the dowager Madame's household."

"Your majesty is correctly informed."

"More than that, the young lady has lately become one of the princess's maids of honor."

"Your majesty is better acquainted with her history than am I."

The king again reflected, and glancing at the comte's anxious countenance, said: "The young lady does not seem to me to be very pretty, comte."

"I am not quite sure," replied Athos.

"I have seen her, but she hardly struck me as being so."

"She seems to be a good and modest girl, but has little beauty, sire."

"Beautiful fair hair, however."

"I think so."

"And her blue eyes are tolerably good."

"Yes, sire."

"With regard to her beauty, then, the match is but an ordinary one. Now for the money side of the question."

"Fifteen to twenty thousand francs dowry at the very outset, sire; the lovers are disinterested enough; for myself, I care little for money."

"For superfluity, you mean; but a needful amount is of importance. With fifteen thousand francs, without landed property, a woman cannot live at court. We will make up the deficiency; I will do it for De Bragelonne."

The king again remarked the coldness with which Athos received the remark.

"Let us pass from the question of money to that of rank," said Louis XIV.; "the daughter of the Marquis de la Valliere, that is well enough; but there is that excellent Saint-Remy, who somewhat damages the credit of the family; and you, comte, are rather particular, I believe, about your own family."

"Sire, I no longer hold to anything but my devotion to your majesty."

The king again paused. "A moment, comte. You have surprised me in no little degree from the beginning of your conversation. You came to ask me to authorize a marriage, and you seem greatly disturbed in having to make the request. Nay, pardon me, comte, but I am rarely deceived, young as I am; for while with some persons I place my friendship at the disposal of my understanding, with others I call my distrust to my aid, by which my discernment is increased. I repeat, that you do not prefer your request as though you wished it success."

"Well, sire, that is true."

"I do not understand you, then; refuse."

"Nay, sire; I love De Bragelonne with my whole heart; he is smitten with Mademoiselle de la Valliere, he weaves dreams of bliss for the future; I am not one who is willing to destroy the illusions of youth. This marriage is objectionable to me, but I implore your majesty to consent to

it forthwith, and thus make Raoul happy."

"Tell me, comte, is she in love with him?"

"If your majesty requires me to speak candidly, I do not believe in Mademoiselle de la Valliere's affection; the delight at being at court, the honor of being in the service of Madame, counteract in her head whatever affection she may happen to have in her heart; it is a marriage similar to many others which already exist at court; but De Bragelonne wishes it, and so let it be."

"And yet you do not resemble those easy-tempered fathers who volunteer as stepping-stones for their children," said the king.

"I am determined enough against the viciously disposed, but not so against men of upright character. Raoul is suffering; he is in great distress of mind; his disposition, naturally light and cheerful, has become gloomy and melancholy. I do not wish to deprive your majesty of the services he may be able to render."

"I understand you," said the king; "and what is more, I understand your heart, too, comte."

"There is no occasion, therefore," replied the comte, "to tell your majesty that my object is to make these children, or rather Raoul, happy."

"And I, too, as much as yourself, comte, wish to secure M. de Bragelonne's happiness."

"I only await your majesty's signature. Raoul will have the honor of presenting himself before your majesty to receive your consent."

"You are mistaken, comte," said the king, firmly; "I have just said that I desire to secure M. de Bragelonne's happiness, and from the present moment, therefore, I oppose his marriage."

"But, sire," exclaimed Athos, "your majesty has promised!"

"Not so, comte, I did not promise you, for it is opposed to my own views."

"I appreciate your majesty's considerate and generous intentions on my behalf; but I take the liberty of recalling to you that I undertook to approach you as an ambassador."

"An ambassador, comte, frequently asks, but does not always obtain what he asks."

"But, sire, it will be such a blow for De Bragelonne."

"My hand shall deal the blow; I will speak to the vicomte."

"Love, sire, is overwhelming in its might."

"Love can be resisted, comte. I myself can assure you of that."

"When one has the soul of a king, - your own, for instance, sire."

"Do not make yourself uneasy on the subject. I have certain views for De Bragelonne. I do not say that he shall not marry Mademoiselle de la Valliere, but I do not wish him to marry so young; I do not wish him to marry her until she has acquired a fortune; and he, on his side, no less deserves favor, such as I wish to confer upon him. In a word, comte, I wish them to wait."

"Yet once more, sire."

"Comte, you told me you came here to request a favor."

"Assuredly, sire."

"Grant me one, then, instead; let us speak no longer upon this matter. It is probable that, before long, war may be declared. I require men about me who are unfettered. I should hesitate to send under fire a married man, or a father of a family. I should hesitate also, on De Bragelonne's account, to endow with a fortune, without some sound reason for it, a young girl, a perfect stranger; such an act would sow jealousy amongst my nobility." Athos bowed, and remained silent.

"Is that all you wished to ask me?" added Louis XIV.

"Absolutely all, sire; and I take my leave of your majesty. Is it, however, necessary that I should inform Raoul?"

"Spare yourself the trouble and annoyance. Tell the vicomte that at my _levee_ to-morrow morning I will speak to him. I shall expect you this evening, comte, to join my card-table."

"I am in traveling-costume, sire."

"A day will come, I hope, when you will leave me no more. Before long, comte, the monarchy will be established in such a manner as to enable me to offer a worthy hospitality to men of your merit."

"Provided, sire, a monarch reigns grandly in the hearts of his subjects, the palace he inhabits matters little, since he is worshipped in a temple." With these words Athos left the cabinet, and found De Bragelonne, who was awaiting him anxiously.

"Well, monsieur?" said the young man.

"The king, Raoul, is well intentioned towards us both; not, perhaps, in the sense you suppose, but he is kind, and generously disposed to our house."

"You have bad news to communicate to me, monsieur," said the young man, turning very pale.

"The king himself will inform you to-morrow morning that it is not bad news."

"The king has not signed, however?"

"The king wishes himself to settle the terms of the contract, and he desires to make it so grand that he requires time for consideration. Throw the blame rather on your own impatience, than on the king's good feelings towards you."

Raoul, in utter consternation, on account of his knowledge of the count's frankness as well as his diplomacy, remained plunged in dull and gloomy stupor.

"Will you not go with me to my lodgings?" said Athos.

"I beg your pardon, monsieur; I will follow you," he stammered out, following Athos down the staircase.

"Since I am here," said Athos, suddenly, "cannot I see M. d'Artagnan?"

"Shall I show you his apartments?" said De Bragelonne.

"Do so."

"They are on the opposite staircase."

They altered their course, but on reaching the landing of the grand staircase, Raoul perceived a servant in the Comte de Guiche's livery, who ran towards him as soon as he heard his voice.

"What is it?" said Raoul.

"This note, monsieur. My master heard of your return and wrote to you without delay; I have been looking for you for the last half-hour."

Raoul approached Athos as he unsealed the letter, saying, "With your permission, monsieur."

"Certainly."

"Dear Raoul," wrote the Comte de Guiche, "I have an affair in hand which requires immediate attention; I know you have returned; come to me as soon as possible."

Hardly had he finished reading it, when a servant in the livery of the Duke of Buckingham, turning out of the gallery, recognized Raoul, and approached him respectfully, saying, "From his Grace, monsieur."

"Well, Raoul, as I see you are already as busy as a general of an army, I shall leave you, and will find M. d'Artagnan myself."

"You will excuse me, I trust," said Raoul.

"Yes, yes, I excuse you; adieu, Raoul; you will find me at my apartments until to-morrow; during the day I may set out for Blois, unless I have orders to the contrary."

"I shall present my respects to you to-morrow, monsieur."

As soon as Athos had left, Raoul opened Buckingham's letter.

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," it ran, "You are, of all the Frenchmen I have known, the one with whom I am most pleased; I am about to put your friendship to the proof. I have received a certain message, written in very good French. As I am an Englishman, I am afraid of not comprehending it very clearly. The letter has a good name attached to it, and that is all I can tell you. Will you be good enough to come and see me? for I am told you have arrived from Blois."

"Your devoted

"VILLIERS, Duke of Buckingham."

"I am going now to see your master," said Raoul to De Guiche's servant, as he dismissed him; "and I shall be with the Duke of Buckingham in an

hour," he added, dismissing with these words the duke's messenger.