

Chapter 26

The Two Friends.

At the very time M. de Baisemeaux was showing Aramis the prisoners in the Bastile, a carriage drew up at Madame de Belliere's door, and, at that still early hour, a young woman alighted, her head muffled in a silk hood. When the servants announced Madame Vanel to Madame de Belliere, the latter was engaged, or rather was absorbed, in reading a letter, which she hurriedly concealed. She had hardly finished her morning toilette, her maid being still in the next room. At the name - at the footsteps of Marguerite Vanel, Madame de Belliere ran to meet her. She fancied she could detect in her friend's eyes a brightness which was neither that of health nor of pleasure. Marguerite embraced her, pressed her hands, and hardly allowed her time to speak. "Dearest," she said, "have you forgotten me? Have you quite given yourself up to the pleasures of the court?"

"I have not even seen the marriage _fetes_."

"What are you doing with yourself, then?"

"I am getting ready to leave for Belliere."

"For Belliere?"

"Yes."

"You are becoming rustic in your tastes, then; I delight to see you so disposed. But you are pale."

"No, I am perfectly well."

"So much the better; I was becoming uneasy about you. You do not know what I have been told."

"People say so many things."

"Yes, but this is very singular."

"How well you know how to excite curiosity, Marguerite."

"Well, I was afraid of vexing you."

"Never; you have yourself always admired me for my evenness of temper."

"Well, then, it is said that - no, I shall never be able to tell you."

"Do not let us talk about it, then," said Madame de Belliere, who detected the ill-nature that was concealed by all these prefaces, yet felt the most anxious curiosity on the subject.

"Well, then, my dear marquise, it is said, for some time past, you no

longer continue to regret Monsieur de Belliere as you used to."

"It is an ill-natured report, Marguerite. I do regret, and shall always regret, my husband; but it is now two years since he died. I am only twenty-eight years old, and my grief at his loss ought not always to control every action and thought of my life. You, Marguerite, who are the model of a wife, would not believe me if I were to say so."

"Why not? Your heart is so soft and yielding," she said, spitefully.

"Yours is so, too, Marguerite, and yet I did not perceive that you allowed yourself to be overcome by grief when your heart was wounded." These words were in direct allusion to Marguerite's rupture with the superintendent, and were also a veiled but direct reproach made against her friend's heart.

As if she only awaited this signal to discharge her shaft, Marguerite exclaimed, "Well, Elise, it is said you are in love." And she looked fixedly at Madame de Belliere, who blushed against her will.

"Women can never escape slander," replied the marquise, after a moment's pause.

"No one slanders you, Elise."

"What! - people say that I am in love, and yet they do not slander me!"

"In the first place, if it be true, it is no slander, but simply a scandal-loving report. In the next place - for you did not allow me to finish what I was saying - the public does not assert that you have abandoned yourself to this passion. It represents you, on the contrary, as a virtuous but loving woman, defending yourself with claws and teeth, shutting yourself up in your own house as in a fortress; in other respects, as impenetrable as that of Danae, notwithstanding Danae's tower was made of brass."

"You are witty, Marguerite," said Madame de Belliere, angrily.

"You always flatter me, Elise. In short, however, you are reported to be incorruptible and unapproachable. You cannot decide whether the world is calumniating you or not; but what is it you are musing about while I am speaking to you?"

"I?"

"Yes; you are blushing and do not answer me."

"I was trying," said the marquise, raising her beautiful eyes brightened with an indication of growing temper, "I was trying to discover to what you could possibly have alluded, you who are so learned in mythological subjects, in comparing me to Danae."

"You were trying to guess that?" said Marguerite, laughing.

"Yes; do you not remember that at the convent, when we were solving our problems in arithmetic - ah! what I have to tell you is learned also, but it is my turn - do you not remember, that if one of the terms were given, we were to find the other? Therefore do you guess now?"

"I cannot conjecture what you mean."

"And yet nothing is more simple. You pretend that I am in love, do you not?"

"So it is said."

"Very well; it is not said, I suppose, that I am in love with an abstraction. There must surely be a name mentioned in this report."

"Certainly, a name is mentioned."

"Very well; it is not surprising, then, that I should try to guess this name, since you do not tell it."

"My dear marquise, when I saw you blush, I did not think you would have to spend much time in conjectures."

"It was the word Danae which you used that surprised me. Danae means a

shower of gold, does it not?"

"That is to say that the Jupiter of Danae changed himself into a shower of gold for her."

"My lover, then, he whom you assign me - "

"I beg your pardon; I am your friend, and assign you no one."

"That may be; but those who are ill disposed towards me."

"Do you wish to hear the name?"

"I have been waiting this half hour for it."

"Well, then, you shall hear it. Do not be shocked; he is a man high in power."

"Good," said the marquise, as she clenched her hands like a patient at the approach of the knife.

"He is a very wealthy man," continued Marguerite; "the wealthiest, it may be. In a word, it is - "

The marquise closed her eyes for a moment.

"It is the Duke of Buckingham," said Marguerite, bursting into laughter. This perfidy had been calculated with extreme ability; the name that was pronounced, instead of the name which the marquise awaited, had precisely the same effect upon her as the badly sharpened axes, that had hacked, without destroying, Messieurs de Chalais and de Thou upon the scaffold. She recovered herself, however, and said, "I was perfectly right in saying you were a witty woman, for you are making the time pass away most agreeably. This joke is a most amusing one, for I have never seen the Duke of Buckingham."

"Never?" said Marguerite, restraining her laughter.

"I have never even left my own house since the duke has been at Paris."

"Oh!" resumed Madame Vanel, stretching out her foot towards a paper which was lying on the carpet near the window; "it is not necessary for people to see each other, since they can write." The marquise trembled, for this paper was the envelope of the letter she was reading as her friend had entered, and was sealed with the superintendent's arms. As she leaned back on the sofa on which she was sitting, Madame de Belliere covered the paper with the thick folds of her large silk dress, and so concealed it.

"Come, Marguerite, tell me, is it to tell me all these foolish reports that you have come to see me so early in the day?"

"No; I came to see you, in the first place, and to remind you of those habits of our earlier days, so delightful to remember, when we used to wander about together at Vincennes, and, sitting beneath an oak, or in some sylvan shade, used to talk of those we loved, and who loved us."

"Do you propose that we should go out together now?"

"My carriage is here, and I have three hours at my disposal."

"I am not dressed yet, Marguerite; but if you wish that we should talk together, we can, without going to the woods of Vincennes, find in my own garden here, beautiful trees, shady groves, a green sward covered with daisies and violets, the perfume of which can be perceived from where we are sitting."

"I regret your refusal, my dear marquise, for I wanted to pour out my whole heart into yours."

"I repeat again, Marguerite, my heart is yours just as much in this room, or beneath the lime-trees in the garden here, as it would be under the oaks in the woods yonder."

"It is not the same thing for me. In approaching Vincennes, marquise, my ardent aspirations approach nearer to that object towards which they have for some days past been directed." The marquise suddenly raised her

head. "Are you surprised, then, that I am still thinking of Saint-Mande?"

"Of Saint-Mande?" exclaimed Madame de Belliere; and the looks of both women met each other like two resistless swords.

"You, so proud!" said the marquise, disdainfully.

"I, so proud!" replied Madame Vanel. "Such is my nature. I do not forgive neglect - I cannot endure infidelity. When I leave any one who weeps at my abandonment, I feel induced still to love him; but when others forsake me and laugh at their infidelity, I love distractedly."

Madame de Belliere could not restrain an involuntary movement.

"She is jealous," said Marguerite to herself.

"Then," continued the marquise, "you are quite enamored of the Duke of Buckingham - I mean of M. Fouquet?" Elise felt the allusion, and her blood seemed to congeal in her heart. "And you wished to go to Vincennes, - to Saint-Mande, even?"

"I hardly know what I wished: you would have advised me perhaps."

"In what respect?"

"You have often done so."

"Most certainly I should not have done so in the present instance, for I do not forgive as you do. I am less loving, perhaps; when my heart has been once wounded, it remains so always."

"But M. Fouquet has not wounded you," said Marguerite Vanel, with the most perfect simplicity.

"You perfectly understand what I mean. M. Fouquet has not wounded me; I do not know of either obligation or injury received at his hands, but you have reason to complain of him. You are my friend, and I am afraid I should not advise you as you would like."

"Ah! you are prejudging the case."

"The sighs you spoke of just now are more than indications."

"You overwhelm me," said the young woman suddenly, as if collecting her whole strength, like a wrestler preparing for a last struggle; "you take only my evil dispositions and my weaknesses into calculation, and do not speak of my pure and generous feelings. If, at this moment, I feel instinctively attracted towards the superintendent, if I even make an advance to him, which, I confess, is very probable, my motive for it is, that M. Fouquet's fate deeply affects me, and because he is, in my opinion, one of the most unfortunate men living."

"Ah!" said the marquise, placing her hand upon her heart, "something new, then, has occurred?"

"Do you not know it?"

"I am utterly ignorant of everything about him," said Madame de Belliere, with the poignant anguish that suspends thought and speech, and even life itself.

"In the first place, then, the king's favor is entirely withdrawn from M. Fouquet, and conferred on M. Colbert."

"So it is stated."

"It is very clear, since the discovery of the plot of Belle-Isle."

"I was told that the discovery of the fortifications there had turned out to M. Fouquet's honor."

Marguerite began to laugh in so cruel a manner that Madame de Belliere could at that moment have delightedly plunged a dagger in her bosom.

"Dearest," continued Marguerite, "there is no longer any question of M. Fouquet's honor; his safety is concerned. Before three days are passed the ruin of the superintendent will be complete."

"Stay," said the marquise, in her turn smiling, "that is going a little

fast."

"I said three days, because I wish to deceive myself with a hope; but probably the catastrophe will be complete within twenty-four hours."

"Why so?"

"For the simplest of all reasons, - that M. Fouquet has no more money."

"In matters of finance, my dear Marguerite, some are without money to-day, who to-morrow can procure millions."

"That might be M. Fouquet's case when he had two wealthy and clever friends who amassed money for him, and wrung it from every possible or impossible source; but those friends are dead."

"Money does not die, Marguerite; it may be concealed, but it can be looked for, bought and found."

"You see things on the bright side, and so much the better for your. It is really very unfortunate that you are not the Egeria of M. Fouquet; you might now show him the source whence he could obtain the millions which the king asked him for yesterday."

"Millions!" said the marquise, in terror.

"Four - an even number."

"Infamous!" murmured Madame de Belliere, tortured by her friend's merciless delight.

"M. Fouquet, I should think, must certainly have four millions," she replied, courageously.

"If he has those which the king requires to-day," said Marguerite, "he will not, perhaps, possess those which the king will demand in a month or so."

"The king will exact money from him again, then?"

"No doubt; and that is my reason for saying that the ruin of poor M. Fouquet is inevitable. Pride will induce him to furnish the money, and when he has no more, he will fall."

"It is true," said the marquise, trembling; "the plan is a bold one; but tell me, does M. Colbert hate M. Fouquet so very much?"

"I think he does not like him. M. Colbert is powerful; he improves on close acquaintance; he has gigantic ideas, a strong will, and discretion; he will rise."

"He will be superintendent?"

"It is probable. Such is the reason, my dear marquise, why I felt myself impressed in favor of that poor man, who once loved, and even adored me; and why, when I see him so unfortunate, I forgive his infidelity, which I have reason to believe he also regrets; and why, moreover, I should not have been disinclined to afford him some consolation, or some good advice; he would have understood the step I had taken, and would have thought kindly of me for it. It is gratifying to be loved, you know. Men value love more highly when they are no longer blinded by its influence."

The marquise, bewildered and overcome by these cruel attacks, which had been calculated with the greatest nicety and precision, hardly knew what to answer in return; she even seemed to have lost all power of thought. Her perfidious friend's voice had assumed the most affectionate tone; she spoke as a woman, but concealed the instincts of a wolf.

"Well," said Madame de Belliere, who had a vague hope that Marguerite would cease to overwhelm a vanquished enemy, "why do you not go and see M. Fouquet?"

"Decidedly, marquise, you have made me reflect. No, it would be unbecoming for me to make the first advance. M. Fouquet no doubt loves me, but he is too proud. I cannot expose myself to an affront... besides, I have my husband to consider. You tell me nothing? Very well, I shall consult M. Colbert on the subject." Marguerite rose smilingly,

as though to take leave, but the marquise had not the strength to imitate her. Marguerite advanced a few paces, in order that she might continue to enjoy the humiliating grief in which her rival was plunged, and then said, suddenly, - "You do not accompany me to the door, then?" The marquise rose, pale and almost lifeless, without thinking of the envelope, which had occupied her attention so greatly at the commencement of the conversation, and which was revealed at the first step she took. She then opened the door of her oratory, and without even turning her head towards Marguerite Vanel, entered it, closing the door after her. Marguerite said, or rather muttered a few words, which Madame de Belliere did not even hear. As soon, however, as the marquise had disappeared, her envious enemy, not being able to resist the desire to satisfy herself that her suspicions were well founded, advanced stealthily like a panther, and seized the envelope. "Ah!" she said, gnashing her teeth, "it was indeed a letter from M. Fouquet she was reading when I arrived," and then darted out of the room. During this interval, the marquise, having arrived behind the rampart, as it were, of her door, felt that her strength was failing her; for a moment she remained rigid, pale and motionless as a statue, and then, like a statue shaken on its base by an earthquake, tottered and fell inanimate on the carpet. The noise of the fall resounded at the same moment as the rolling of Marguerite's carriage leaving the hotel.