

Chapter 34

The Advisers.

The king left Madame in a state of agitation it would have been difficult even for himself to have explained. It is impossible, in fact, to depict the secret play of those strange sympathies which, suddenly and apparently without any cause, are excited, after many years passed in the greatest calmness and indifference, by two hearts destined to love each other. Why had Louis formerly disdained, almost hated, Madame? Why did he now find the same woman so beautiful, so captivating? And why, not only were his thoughts occupied about her, but still more, why were they so continuously occupied about her? Why, in fact, had Madame, whose eyes and mind were sought for in another direction, shown during the last week towards the king a semblance of favor which encouraged the belief of still greater regard. It must not be supposed that Louis proposed to himself any plan of seduction; the tie which united Madame to his brother was, or at least, seemed to him, an insuperable barrier; he was even too far removed from that barrier to perceive its existence. But on the downward path of those passions in which the heart rejoices, towards which youth impels us, no one can decide where to stop, not even the man who has in advance calculated all the chances of his own success or another's submission. As far as Madame was concerned, her regard for the king may easily be explained: she was young, a coquette, and ardently fond of admiration. Hers was one of those buoyant, impetuous natures, which upon a theatre would leap over the greatest obstacles to obtain an acknowledgement of applause from the spectators. It was not surprising,

then, that, after having been adored by Buckingham, by De Guiche, who was superior to Buckingham, even if it were only from that negative merit, so much appreciated by women, that is to say, novelty - it was not surprising, we say, that the princess should raise her ambition to being admired by the king, who not only was the first person in the kingdom, but was one of the handsomest and cleverest men in Europe. As for the sudden passion with which Louis was inspired for his sister-in-law, physiology would perhaps supply an explanation by some hackneyed commonplace reasons, and nature by means of her mysterious affinity of characters. Madame had the most beautiful black eyes in the world; Louis, eyes as beautiful, but blue. Madame was laughter-loving and unreserved in her manners; Louis, melancholy and diffident. Summoned to meet each other for the first time upon the grounds of interest and common curiosity, these two opposite natures were mutually influenced by the mingling of their reciprocal contradictions of character. Louis, when he returned to his own rooms, acknowledged to himself that Madame was the most attractive woman of his court. Madame, left alone, delightedly thought that she had made a great impression on the king. This feeling with her must remain passive, whilst the king could not but act with all the natural vehemence of the heated fancies of a young man, and of a young man who has but to express a wish to see his wish fulfilled.

The first thing the king did was to announce to Monsieur that everything was quietly arranged; that Madame had the greatest respect, the sincerest affection for him; but that she was of a proud, impetuous character, and

that her susceptibilities were so acute as to require very careful management.

Monsieur replied in the reticent tone of voice he generally adopted with his brother, that he could not very well understand the susceptibilities of a woman whose conduct might, in his opinion, expose her to censorious remarks, and that if any one had a right to feel wounded, it was he, Monsieur himself. To this the king replied in a quick tone of voice, which showed the interest he took in his sister-in-law, "Thank Heaven, Madame is above censure."

"The censure of others, certainly, I admit," said Monsieur; "but not above mine, I presume."

"Well," said the king, "all I have to say, Philip, is that Madame's conduct does not deserve your censure. She certainly is heedless and singular, but professes the best feelings. The English character is not always well understood in France, and the liberty of English manners sometimes surprises those who do not know the extent to which this liberty is enriched by innocence."

"Ah!" said Monsieur, more and more piqued, "from the very moment that your majesty absolves my wife, whom I accuse, my wife is not guilty, and I have nothing more to say."

"Philip," replied the king hastily, for he felt the voice of conscience

murmuring softly in his heart, that Monsieur was not altogether wrong, "what I have done, and what I have said, has been only for your happiness. I was told that you complained of a want of confidence and attention on Madame's part, and I did not wish your uneasiness to be prolonged. It is part of my duty to watch over your household, as over that of the humblest of my subjects. I have satisfied myself, therefore, with the sincerest pleasure, that your apprehensions have no foundation."

"And," continued Monsieur, in an interrogative tone of voice, and fixing his eyes upon his brother, "what your majesty has discovered for Madame – and I bow myself to your superior judgment - have you verified for those who have been the cause of the scandal of which I complain?"

"You are right, Philip," said the king; "I will reserve that point for future consideration."

These words comprised an order as well as a consolation; the prince felt it to be so, and withdrew.

As for Louis, he went to seek his mother, for he felt that he had need of a more complete absolution than that he had just received from his brother. Anne of Austria did not entertain for M. de Guiche the same reasons for indulgence she had had for Buckingham. She perceived, at the very first words he pronounced, that Louis was not disposed to be severe.

To appear in a contradictory humor was one of the stratagems of the good

queen, in order to succeed in ascertaining the truth. But Louis was no longer in his apprenticeship; already for more than a year past he had been king, and during that year he had learned how to dissemble. Listening to Anne of Austria, in order to permit her to disclose her own thoughts, testifying his approval only by look and gesture, he became convinced, from certain piercing glances, and from certain skillful insinuations, that the queen, so clear-sighted in matters of gallantry, had, if not guessed, at least suspected, his weakness for Madame. Of all his auxiliaries, Anne of Austria would be the most important to secure; of all his enemies, Anne of Austria would prove most dangerous. Louis, therefore, changed his maneuvers. He complained of Madame, absolved Monsieur, listened to what his mother had to say of De Guiche, as he had previously listened to what she had to say of Buckingham, and then, when he saw that she thought she had gained a complete victory over him, he left her.

The whole of the court, that is to say, all the favorites and more intimate associates, and they were numerous, since there were already five masters, were assembled in the evening for the repetition of the ballet. This interval had been occupied by poor De Guiche in receiving visits; among the number was one which he hoped and feared nearly to an equal extent. It was that of the Chevalier de Lorraine. About three o'clock in the afternoon the chevalier entered De Guiche's rooms. His looks were of the most reassuring character. "Monsieur," said he to De Guiche, "was in an excellent humor, and no none could say that the slightest cloud had passed across the conjugal sky. Besides, Monsieur

was not one to bear ill-feeling."

For a long time past, during his residence at the court, the Chevalier de Lorraine had decided, that of Louis XIII.'s two sons, Monsieur was the one who had inherited the father's character - an uncertain, irresolute character; impulsively good, indifferently disposed at bottom; but certainly a cipher for his friends. He especially cheered De Guiche, by pointing out to him that Madame would, before long, succeed in governing her husband, and that, consequently, that man would govern Monsieur who should succeed in influencing Madame.

To this, De Guiche full of mistrust and presence of mind, replied, "Yes, chevalier; but I believe Madame to be a very dangerous person."

"In what respect?"

"She has perceived that Monsieur is not very passionately inclined towards women."

"Quite true," said the Chevalier de Lorraine, laughing.

"In that case, Madame will choose the first one who approaches, in order to make him the object of her preference, and to bring back her husband by jealousy."

"Deep! deep!" exclaimed the chevalier.

"But true," replied De Guiche.

Neither the one nor the other expressed his real thought. De Guiche, at the very moment he thus attacked Madame's character, mentally asked her forgiveness from the bottom of his heart. The chevalier, while admiring De Guiche's penetration, was leading him, blindfolded, to the brink of the precipice. De Guiche then questioned him more directly upon the effect produced by the scene of the morning, and upon the still more serious effect produced by the scene at dinner.

"But I have already told you they are all laughing at it," replied the Chevalier de Lorraine, "and Monsieur himself at the head of them."

"Yet," hazarded De Guiche, "I have heard that the king paid Madame a visit."

"Yes, precisely so. Madame was the only one who did not laugh, and the king went to her in order to make her laugh, too."

"So that - "

"So that nothing is altered in the arrangements of the day," said the chevalier.

"And is there a repetition of the ballet this evening?"

"Certainly."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite," returned the chevalier.

At this moment of the conversation between the two young men, Raoul entered, looking full of anxiety. As soon as the chevalier, who had a secret dislike for him, as for every other noble character, perceived him enter, he rose from his seat.

"What do you advise me to do, then?" inquired De Guiche of the chevalier.

"I advise you to go to sleep in perfect tranquillity, my dear count."

"And my advice, De Guiche," said Raoul, "is the very opposite."

"What is that?"

"To mount your horse and set off at once for one of your estates; on your arrival, follow the chevalier's advice, if you like; and, what is more, you can sleep there as long and as tranquilly as you please."

"What! set off!" exclaimed the chevalier, feigning surprise; "why should De Guiche set off?"

"Because, and you cannot be ignorant of it - you particularly so - because every one is talking about the scene which has passed between Monsieur and De Guiche."

De Guiche turned pale.

"Not at all," replied the chevalier, "not at all; and you have been wrongly informed, M. de Bragelonne."

"I have been perfectly well informed, on the contrary, monsieur," replied Raoul, "and the advice I give De Guiche is that of a friend."

During this discussion, De Guiche, somewhat shaken, looked alternately first at one and then at the other of his advisers. He inwardly felt that a game, important in all its consequences for the rest of his life, was being played at that moment.

"Is it not fact," said the chevalier, putting the question to the count himself, "is it not fact, De Guiche, that the scene was not so tempestuous as the Vicomte de Bragelonne seems to think, and who, moreover, was not himself there?"

"Whether tempestuous or not," persisted Raoul, "it is not precisely of the scene itself that I am speaking, but of the consequences that may ensue. I know that Monsieur has threatened, I know that Madame has been

in tears."

"Madame in tears!" exclaimed De Guiche, imprudently clasping his hands.

"Ah!" said the chevalier, laughing, "this is indeed a circumstance I was not acquainted with. You are decidedly better informed than I am, Monsieur de Bragelonne."

"And it is because I am better informed than yourself, chevalier, that I insist upon De Guiche leaving."

"No, no; I regret to differ from you, vicomte; but his departure is unnecessary. Why, indeed, should he leave? tell us why."

"The king!"

"The king!" exclaimed De Guiche.

"Yes; I tell you the king has taken up the affair."

"Bah!" said the chevalier, "the king likes De Guiche, and particularly his father; reflect, that, if the count were to leave, it would be an admission that he had done something which merited rebuke."

"Why so?"

"No doubt of it; when one runs away, it is either from guilt or fear."

"Sometimes, because a man is offended; often because he is wrongfully accused," said Bragelonne. "We will assign as a reason for his departure, that he feels hurt and injured - nothing will be easier; we will say that we both did our utmost to keep him, and you, at least, will not be speaking otherwise than the truth. Come, De Guiche, you are innocent, and, being so, the scene of to-day must have wounded you. So set off."

"No, De Guiche, remain where you are," said the chevalier; "precisely as M. de Bragelonne has put it, because you are innocent. Once more, forgive me, vicomte; but my opinion is the very opposite to your own."

"And you are at perfect liberty to maintain it, monsieur; but be assured that the exile which De Guiche will voluntarily impose upon himself will be of short duration. He can terminate it whenever he pleases, and returning from his voluntary exile, he will meet with smiles from all lips; while, on the contrary, the anger of the king may now draw down a storm upon his head, the end of which no one can foresee."

The chevalier smiled, and muttered to himself, "That is the very thing I wish." And at the same time he shrugged his shoulders, a movement which did not escape the count, who dreaded, if he quitted the court, to seem to yield to a feeling of fear.

"No, no; I have decided, Bragelonne; I stay."

"I prophesy, then," said Raoul, sadly, "that misfortune will befall you, De Guiche."

"I, too, am a prophet, but not a prophet of evil; on the contrary, count, I say to you, 'remain.'"

"Are you sure," inquired De Guiche, "that the repetition of the ballet still takes place?"

"Quite sure."

"Well, you see, Raoul," continued De Guiche, endeavoring to smile, "you see, the court is not so very sorrowful, or so readily disposed for internal dissensions, when dancing is carried on with such assiduity. Come, acknowledge that," said the count to Raoul, who shook his head, saying, "I have nothing to add."

"But," inquired the chevalier, curious to learn whence Raoul had obtained his information, the exactitude of which he was inwardly forced to admit, "since you say you are well informed, vicomte, how can you be better informed than myself, who am one of the prince's most intimate companions?"

"To such a declaration I submit. You certainly ought to be perfectly

well informed, I admit; and, as a man of honor is incapable of saying anything but what he knows to be true, or of speaking otherwise than what he thinks, I will say no more, but confess myself defeated, and leave you in possession of the field of battle."

Whereupon Raoul, who now seemed only to care to be left quiet, threw himself upon a couch, whilst the count summoned his servants to aid him in dressing. The chevalier, finding that time was passing away, wished to leave; but he feared, too, that Raoul, left alone with De Guiche, might yet influence him to change his mind. He therefore made use of his last resource.

"Madame," he said, "will be brilliant; she appears to-day in her costume of Pomona."

"Yes, that is so," exclaimed the count.

"And she has just given directions in consequence," continued the chevalier. "You know, Monsieur de Bragelonne, that the king is to appear as Spring."

"It will be admirable," said De Guiche; "and that is a better reason for me to remain than any you have yet given, because I am to appear as Autumn, and shall have to dance with Madame. I cannot absent myself without the king's orders, since my departure would interrupt the ballet."

"I," said the chevalier, "am to be only a simple _egypan_; true, it is, I am a bad dancer, and my legs are not well made. Gentlemen, adieu. Do not forget the basket of fruit, which you are to offer to Pomona, count."

"Rest assured," said De Guiche, delightedly, "I shall forget nothing."

"I am now quite certain that he will remain," murmured the Chevalier de Lorraine to himself.

Raoul, when the chevalier had left, did not even attempt to dissuade his friend, for he felt that it would be trouble thrown away; he merely observed to the comte, in his melancholy and melodious voice, "You are embarking in a most dangerous enterprise. I know you well; you go to extremes in everything, and the lady you love does so, too. Admitting for an instant that she should at last love you - "

"Oh, never!" exclaimed De Guiche.

"Why do you say never?"

"Because it would be a great misfortune for both of us."

"In that case, instead of regarding you simply imprudent, I cannot but consider you absolutely mad."

"Why?"

"Are you perfectly sure - mind, answer me frankly - that you do not wish her whom you love to make any sacrifice for you?"

"Yes, yes; quite sure."

"Love her, then, at a distance."

"What! at a distance?"

"Certainly; what matters being present or absent, since you expect nothing from her? Love her portrait, a memento."

"Raoul!"

"Love is a shadow, an illusion, a chimera; be devoted to the affection itself, in giving a name to your ideality."

"Ah!"

"You turn away; your servants approach. I will say no more. In good or bad fortune, De Guiche, depend on me."

"Indeed I shall do so."

"Very well; that is all I had to say to you. Spare no pains in your

person, De Guiche, and look your very best. Adieu."

"You will not be present, then, at the ballet, vicomte?"

"No; I shall have a visit to pay in town. Farewell, De Guiche."

The reception was to take place in the king's apartments. In the first place, there were the queens, then Madame, and a few ladies of the court, who had been carefully selected. A great number of courtiers, also selected, occupied the time, before the dancing commenced, in conversing, as people knew how to converse in those times. None of the ladies who had received invitations appeared in the costumes of the *fete*, as the Chevalier de Lorraine had predicted, but many conversations took place about the rich and ingenious toilettes designed by different painters for the ballet of "The Demi-Gods," for thus were termed the kings and queens of which Fontainebleau was about to become the Pantheon. Monsieur arrived, holding in his hand a drawing representing his character; he looked somewhat anxious; he bowed courteously to the young queen and his mother, but saluted Madame almost cavalierly. His notice of her and his coldness of manner were observed by all. M. de Guiche indemnified the princess by a look of passionate devotion, and it must be admitted that Madame, as she raised her eyes, returned it to him with interest. It is unquestionable that De Guiche had never looked so handsome, for Madame's glance had its customary effect of lighting up the features of the son of the Marshal de Gramont. The king's sister-in-law felt a storm mustering

above her head; she felt, too, that during the whole of the day, so fruitful in future events, she had acted unjustly, if not treasonably, towards one who loved her with such a depth of devotion. In her eyes the moment seemed to have arrived for an acknowledgement to the poor victim of the injustice of the morning. Her heart spoke, and murmured the name of De Guiche; the count was sincerely pitied and accordingly gained the victory over all others. Neither Monsieur, nor the king, nor the Duke of Buckingham, was any longer thought of; De Guiche at that moment reigned without a rival. But although Monsieur also looked very handsome, still he could not be compared to the count. It is well known - indeed all women say so - that a wide difference invariably exists between the good looks of a lover and those of a husband. Besides, in the present case, after Monsieur had left, and after the courteous and affectionate recognition of the young queen and of the queen-mother, and the careless and indifferent notice of Madame, which all the courtiers had remarked; all these motives gave the lover the advantage over the husband. Monsieur was too great a personage to notice these details. Nothing is so certain as a well settled idea of superiority to prove the inferiority of the man who has that opinion of himself. The king arrived. Every one looked for what might possibly happen in the glance, which began to bestir the world, like the brow of Jupiter Tonans. Louis had none of his brother's gloominess, but was perfectly radiant. Having examined the greater part of the drawings which were displayed for his inspection on every side, he gave his opinion or made his remarks upon them, and in this manner rendered some happy and others wretched by a single word. Suddenly his glance, which was smilingly directed towards Madame,

detected the slight correspondence established between the princess and the count. He bit his lips, but when he opened them again to utter a few commonplace remarks, he said, advancing towards the queens: -

"I have just been informed that everything is now prepared at Fontainebleau, in accordance with my directions." A murmur of satisfaction arose from the different groups, and the king perceived on every face the greatest anxiety to receive an invitation for the _fetes_. "I shall leave to-morrow," he added. Whereupon the profoundest silence immediately ensued. "And I invite," said the king, finishing, "all those who are now present to get ready to accompany me."

Smiling faces were now everywhere visible, with the exception of Monsieur, who seemed to retain his ill-humor. The different noblemen and ladies of the court thereupon defiled before the king, one after the other, in order to thank his majesty for the great honor which had been conferred upon them by the invitation. When it came to De Guiche's turn, the king said, "Ah! M. de Guiche, I did not see you."

The comte bowed, and Madame turned pale. De Guiche was about to open his lips to express his thanks, when the king said, "Comte, this is the season for farming purposes in the country; I am sure your tenants in Normandy will be glad to see you."

The king, after this pitiless attack, turned his back on the poor comte,

whose turn it was now to become pale; he advanced a few steps towards the king, forgetting that the king is never spoken to except in reply to questions addressed.

"I have perhaps misunderstood your majesty," he stammered out.

The king turned his head slightly, and with a cold and stern glance, which plunged like a sword relentlessly into the hearts of those under disgrace, repeated, "I said retire to your estates," allowing every syllable to fall slowly one by one.

A cold perspiration bedewed the comte's face, his hands convulsively opened, and his hat, which he held between his trembling fingers, fell to the ground. Louis sought his mother's glance, as though to show her that he was master; he sought his brother's triumphant look, as if to ask him if he were satisfied with the vengeance taken; and lastly, his eyes fell upon Madame; but the princess was laughing and smiling with Madame de Noailles. She heard nothing, or rather had pretended not to hear at all. The Chevalier de Lorraine looked on also, with one of those looks of fixed hostility that seemed to give to a man's glance the power of a lever when it raises an obstacle, wrests it away, and casts it to a distance. M. de Guiche was left alone in the king's cabinet, the whole of the company having departed. Shadows seemed to dance before his eyes. He suddenly broke through the settled despair that overwhelmed him, and flew to hide himself in his own room, where Raoul awaited him, immovable in his own sad presentiments.

"Well?" he murmured, seeing his friend enter, bareheaded, with a wild gaze and tottering gait.

"Yes, yes, it is true," said De Guiche, unable to utter more, and falling exhausted upon the couch.

"And she?" inquired Raoul.

"She," exclaimed his unhappy friend, as he raised his hand clenched in anger, towards Heaven. "She! - "

"What did she say and do?"

"She said that her dress suited her admirably, and then she laughed."

A fit of hysteric laughter seemed to shatter his nerves, for he fell backwards, completely overcome.