

Chapter 41

What Was Said under the Royal Oak.

The softness of the air, the stillness of the foliage, tacitly imposed upon these young girls an engagement to change immediately their giddy conversation for one of a more serious character. She, indeed, whose disposition was the most lively, - Montalais, for instance, - was the first to yield to the influence; and she began by heaving a deep sigh, and saying: - "What happiness to be here alone, and at liberty, with every right to be frank, especially towards one another."

"Yes," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; "for the court, however brilliant it may be, has always some falsehood concealed beneath the folds of its velvet robes, or the glitter of its diamonds."

"I," replied La Valliere, "I never tell a falsehood; when I cannot speak the truth, I remain silent."

"You will not long remain in favor," said Montalais; "it is not here as it was at Blois, where we told the dowager Madame all our little annoyances, and all our longings. There were certain days when Madame remembered that she herself had been young, and, on those days, whoever talked with her found in her a sincere friend. She related to us her flirtations with Monsieur, and we told her of the flirtations she had had with others, or, at least, the rumors of them that had spread abroad. Poor woman, so simple-minded! she laughed at them, as we did. Where is

she now?"

"Ah, Montalais, - laughter-loving Montalais!" cried La Valliere; "you see you are sighing again; the woods inspire you, and you are almost reasonable this evening."

"You ought not, either of you," said Athenais, "to regret the court at Blois so much, unless you do not feel happy with us. A court is a place where men and women resort to talk of matters which mothers, guardians, and especially confessors, severely denounce."

"Oh, Athenais!" said Louise, blushing.

"Athenais is frank to-night," said Montalais; "let us avail ourselves of it."

"Yes, let us take advantage of it, for this evening I could divulge the softest secrets of my heart."

"Ah, if M. Montespan were here!" said Montalais.

"Do you think that I care for M. de Montespan?" murmured the beautiful young girl.

"He is handsome, I believe?"

"Yes. And that is no small advantage in my eyes."

"There now, you see - "

"I will go further, and say, that of all the men whom one sees here, he is the handsomest, and the most - "

"What was that?" said La Valliere, starting suddenly from the mossy bank.

"A deer hurrying by, perhaps."

"I am only afraid of men," said Athenais.

"When they do not resemble M. de Montespan."

"A truce to raillery. M. de Montespan is attentive to me, but that does not commit me in any way. Is not M. de Guiche here, he who is so devoted to Madame?"

"Poor fellow!" said La Valliere.

"Why to be pitied? Madame is sufficiently beautiful, and of high enough rank, I suppose."

La Valliere shook her head sorrowfully, saying, "When one loves, it is neither beauty nor rank; - when one loves it should be the heart, or the

eyes only, of him, or of her whom one loves."

Montalais began to laugh loudly. "Heart, eyes," she said; "oh, sugar-plums!"

"I speak for myself;" replied La Valliere.

"Noble sentiments," said Athenais, with an air of protection, but with indifference.

"Are they not your own?" asked Louise.

"Perfectly so; but to continue: how can one pity a man who bestows his attentions upon such a woman as Madame? If any disproportion exists, it is on the count's side."

"Oh! no, no," returned La Valliere; "it is on Madame's side."

"Explain yourself."

"I will. Madame has not even a wish to know what love is. She diverts herself with the feeling, as children do with fireworks, from which a spark might set a palace on fire. It makes a display, and that is all she cares about. Besides, pleasure forms the tissue of which she wishes her life to be woven. M. de Guiche loves this illustrious personage, but she will never love him."

Athenais laughed disdainfully. "Do people really ever love?" she said.

"Where are the noble sentiments you just now uttered? Does not a woman's virtue consist in the uncompromising refusal of every intrigue that might compromise her? A properly regulated woman, endowed with a natural heart, ought to look at men, make herself loved - adored, even, by them, and say at the very utmost but once in her life, 'I begin to think that I ought not to have been what I am, - I should have detested this one less than others.'"

"Therefore," exclaimed La Valliere, "that is what M. de Montespan has to expect."

"Certainly; he, as well as every one else. What! have I not said that I admit he possesses a certain superiority, and would not that be enough? My dear child, a woman is a queen during the entire period nature permits her to enjoy sovereign power - from fifteen to thirty-five years of age. After that, we are free to have a heart, when we only have that left - "

"Oh, oh!" murmured La Valliere.

"Excellent," cried Montalais; "a very masterly woman; Athenais, you will make your way in the world."

"Do you not approve of what I say?"

"Completely," replied her laughing companion.

"You are not serious, Montalais?" said Louise.

"Yes, yes; I approve everything Athenais has just said; only - "

"Only _what?_"

"Well, I cannot carry it out. I have the firmest principles; I form resolutions beside which the laws of the Stadtholder and of the King of Spain are child's play; but when the moment arrives to put them into execution, nothing comes of them."

"Your courage fails?" said Athenais, scornfully.

"Miserably so."

"Great weakness of nature," returned Athenais. "But at least you make a choice."

"Why, no. It pleases fate to disappoint me in everything; I dream of emperors, and I find only - "

"Aure, Aure!" exclaimed La Valliere, "for pity's sake, do not, for the pleasure of saying something witty, sacrifice those who love you with such devoted affection."

"Oh, I do not trouble myself much about that; those who love me are sufficiently happy that I do not dismiss them altogether. So much the worse for myself if I have a weakness for any one, but so much the worse for others if I revenge myself upon them for it."

"You are right," said Athenais, "and, perhaps, you too will reach the goal. In other words, young ladies, that is termed being a coquette. Men, who are very silly in most things, are particularly so in confounding, under the term of coquetry, a woman's pride, and love of changing her sentiments as she does her dress. I, for instance, am proud; that is to say, impregnable. I treat my admirers harshly, but without any pretention to retain them. Men call me a coquette, because they are vain enough to think I care for them. Other women - Montalais, for instance - have allowed themselves to be influenced by flattery; they would be lost were it not for that most fortunate principle of instinct which urges them to change suddenly, and punish the man whose devotion they so recently accepted."

"A very learned dissertation," said Montalais, in the tone of thorough enjoyment.

"It is odious!" murmured Louise.

"Thanks to that sort of coquetry, for, indeed, that is genuine coquetry," continued Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; "the lover who, a little while

since, was puffed up with pride, in a minute afterwards is suffering at every pore of his vanity and self-esteem. He was, perhaps, already beginning to assume the airs of a conqueror, but now he retreats defeated; he was about to assume an air of protection towards us, but he is obliged to prostrate himself once more. The result of all this is, that, instead of having a husband who is jealous and troublesome, free from restraint in his conduct towards us, we have a lover always trembling in our presence, always fascinated by our attractions, always submissive; and for this simple reason, that he finds the same woman never twice of the same mind. Be convinced, therefore, of the advantages of coquetry. Possessing that, one reigns a queen among women in cases where Providence has withheld that precious faculty of holding one's heart and mind in check."

"How clever you are," said Montalais, "and how well you understand the duty women owe themselves!"

"I am only settling a case of individual happiness," said Athenais modestly; "and defending myself, like all weak, loving dispositions, against the oppressions of the stronger."

"La Valliere does not say a word."

"Does she not approve of what we are saying?"

"Nay; only I do not understand it," said Louise. "You talk like people

not called upon to live in this world of ours."

"And very pretty your world is," said Montalais.

"A world," returned Athenais, "in which men worship a woman until she has fallen, - and insult her when she has fallen."

"Who spoke to you of falling?" said Louise.

"Yours is a new theory, then; will you tell us how you intend to resist yielding to temptation, if you allow yourself to be hurried away by feelings of affection?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the young girl, raising towards the dark heavens her beautiful large eyes filled with tears, "if you did but know what a heart is, I would explain, and convince you; a loving heart is stronger than all your coquetry, more powerful than all your pride. A woman is never truly loved, I believe; a man never loves with idolatry, unless he feels sure he is loved in return. Let old men, whom we read of in comedies, fancy themselves adored by coquettes. A young man is conscious of, and knows them; if he has a fancy, or a strong desire, and an absorbing passion, for a coquette, he cannot mistake her; a coquette may drive him out of his senses, but will never make him fall in love. Love, such as I conceive it to be, is an incessant, complete, and perfect sacrifice; but it is not the sacrifice of one only of the two persons thus united. It is the perfect abnegation of two who are desirous of blending their

beings into one. If ever I love, I shall implore my lover to leave me free and pure; I will tell him, and he will understand, that my heart was torn by my refusal, and he, in his love for me, aware of the magnitude of my sacrifice, - he, in his turn, I say, will store his devotion for me, - will respect me, and will not seek my ruin, to insult me when I shall have fallen, as you said just now, whilst uttering your blasphemies against love, such as I understand it. That is my idea of love. And now you will tell me, perhaps, that my love will despise me; I defy him to do so, unless he be the vilest of men, and my heart assures me that it is not such a man I would choose. A look from me will repay him for the sacrifices he makes, or will inspire him with the virtues which he would never think he possessed."

"But, Louise," exclaimed Montalais, "you tell us this, and do not carry it into practice."

"What do you mean?"

"You are adored by Raoul de Bragelonne, who worships you on both knees. The poor fellow is made the victim of your virtue, just as he would be - nay, more than he would be, even - of my coquetry, or Athenais's pride."

"All this is simply a different shade of coquetry," said Athenais; "and Louise, I perceive, is a coquette without knowing it."

"Oh!" said La Valliere.

"Yes, you may call it instinct, if you please, keenest sensibility, exquisite refinement of feeling, perpetual play of restrained outbreaks of affection, which end in smoke. It is very artful too, and very effective. I should even, now that I reflect upon it, have preferred this system of tactics to my own pride, for waging war on members of the other sex, because it offers the advantage sometimes of thoroughly convincing them; but, at the present moment, without utterly condemning myself, I declare it to be superior to the non-complex coquetry of Montalais." And the two young girls began to laugh.

La Valliere alone preserved silence, and quietly shook her head. Then, a moment after, she added, "If you were to tell me, in the presence of a man, but a fourth part of what you have just said, or even if I were assured that you think it, I should die of shame and grief where I am now."

"Very well; die, poor tender little darling," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; "for if there are no men here, there are at least two women, your own friends, who declare you to be attained and convicted of being a coquette from instinct; in other words, the most dangerous kind of coquette the world possesses."

"Oh! mesdemoiselles," replied La Valliere, blushing, and almost ready to weep. Her two companions again burst out laughing.

"Very well! I will ask Bragelonne to tell me."

"Bragelonne?" said Athenais.

"Yes! Bragelonne, who is as courageous as Caesar, and as clever and witty as M. Fouquet. Poor fellow! for twelve years he has known you, loved you, and yet - one can hardly believe it - he has never even kissed the tips of your fingers."

"Tell us the reason of this cruelty, you who are all heart," said Athenais to La Valliere.

"Let me explain it by a single word - virtue. You will perhaps deny the existence of virtue?"

"Come, Louise, tell us the truth," said Aure, taking her by the hand.

"What do you wish me to tell you?" cried La Valliere.

"Whatever you like; but it will be useless for you to say anything, for I persist in my opinion of you. A coquette from instinct; in other words, as I have already said, and I say it again, the most dangerous of all coquettes."

"Oh! no, no; for pity's sake do not believe that!"

"What! twelve years of extreme severity."

"How can that be, since twelve years ago I was only five years old? The frivolity of the child cannot surely be placed to the young girl's account."

"Well! you are now seventeen; three years instead of twelve. During those three years you have remained constantly and unchangeably cruel. Against you are arrayed the silent shades of Blois, the meetings when you diligently coned the stars together, the evening wanderings beneath the plantain-trees, his impassioned twenty years speaking to your fourteen summers, the fire of his glances addressed to yourself."

"Yes, yes; but so it is!"

"Impossible!"

"But why impossible?"

"Tell us something credible and we will believe you."

"Yet, if you were to suppose one thing."

"What is that?"

"Suppose that I thought I was in love, and that I am not."

"What! not in love!"

"Well, then! if I have acted in a different manner to what others do when they are in love, it is because I do not love; and because my hour has not yet come."

"Louise, Louise," said Montalais, "take care or I will remind you of the remark you made just now. Raoul is not here; do not overwhelm him while he is absent; be charitable, and if, on closer inspection, you think you do not love him, tell him so, poor fellow!" and she began to laugh.

"Louise pitied M. de Guiche just now," said Athenais; "would it be possible to detect an explanation of her indifference for the one in this compassion for the other?"

"Say what you please," said La Valliere, sadly; "upbraid me as you like, since you do not understand me."

"Oh! oh!" replied Montalais, "temper, sorrow, tears; we are jesting, Louise, and are not, I assure you, quite the monsters you suppose. Look at the proud Athenais, as she is called; she does not love M. de Montespan, it is true, but she would be in despair if M. de Montespan did not continue to love her. Look at me; I laugh at M. Malicorne, but the poor fellow whom I laugh at knows precisely when he will be permitted to press his lips upon my hand. And yet the eldest of us is not twenty

yet. What a future before us!"

"Silly, silly girls!" murmured Louise.

"You are quite right," said Montalais; "and you alone have spoken words of wisdom."

"Certainly."

"I do not dispute it," replied Athenais. "And so it is clear you do not love poor M. de Bragelonne?"

"Perhaps she does," said Montalais; "she is not yet quite certain of it. But, in any case, listen, Athenais; if M. de Bragelonne is ever free, I will give you a little friendly advice."

"What is that?"

"To look at him well before you decide in favor of M. de Montespan."

"Oh! in that way of considering the subject, M. de Bragelonne is not the only one whom one could look at with pleasure; M. de Guiche, for instance, has his value also."

"He did not distinguish himself this evening," said Montalais; "and I know from very good authority that Madame thought him insupportable."

"M. de Saint-Aignan produced a most brilliant effect, and I am sure that more than one person who saw him dance this evening will not soon forget him. Do you not think so, La Valliere?"

"Why do you ask me? I did not see him, nor do I know him."

"What! you did not see M. de Saint-Aignan? Don't you know him?"

"No."

"Come, come, do not affect a virtue more extravagantly excessive than our vanity! - you have eyes, I suppose?"

"Excellent."

"Then you must have seen all those who danced this evening."

"Yes, nearly all."

"That is a very impertinent 'nearly all' for somebody."

"You must take it for what it is worth."

"Very well; now, among all those gentlemen whom you saw, which do you prefer?"

"Yes," said Montalais, "is it M. de Saint-Aignan, or M. de Guiche, or M. - "

"I prefer no one; I thought them all about the same."

"Do you mean, then, that among that brilliant assembly, the first court in the world, no one pleased you?"

"I do not say that."

"Tell us, then, who your ideal is?"

"It is not an ideal being."

"He exists, then?"

"In very truth," exclaimed La Valliere, aroused and excited; "I cannot understand you at all. What! you who have a heart as I have, eyes as I have, and yet you speak of M. de Guiche, of M. de Saint-Aignan, when the king was there." These words, uttered in a precipitate manner, and in an agitated, fervid tone of voice, made her two companions, between whom she was seated, exclaim in a manner that terrified her, "_The king!_"

La Valliere buried her face in her hands. "Yes," she murmured; "the king! the king! Have you ever seen any one to be compared to the king?"

"You were right just now in saying you had excellent eyes, Louise, for you see a great distance; too far, indeed. Alas! the king is not one upon whom our poor eyes have a right to hinge themselves."

"That is too true," cried La Valliere; "it is not the privilege of all eyes to gaze upon the sun; but I will look upon him, even were I to be blinded in doing so." At this moment, and as though caused by the words which had just escaped La Valliere's lips, a rustling of leaves, and of what sounded like some silken material, was heard behind the adjoining bushes. The young girls hastily rose, almost terrified out of their senses. They distinctly saw the leaves move, without being able to see what it was that stirred them.

"It is a wolf or a wild boar," cried Montalais; "fly! fly!" The three girls, in the extremity of terror, fled by the first path that presented itself, and did not stop until they had reached the verge of the wood. There, breathless, leaning against each other, feeling their hearts throb wildly, they endeavored to collect their senses, but could only succeed in doing so after the lapse of some minutes. Perceiving at last the lights from the windows of the chateau, they decided to walk towards them. La Valliere was exhausted with fatigue, and Aure and Athenais were obliged to support her.

"We have escaped well," said Montalais.

"I am greatly afraid," said La Valliere, "that it was something worse than a wolf. For my part, and I speak as I think, I should have preferred to have run the risk of being devoured alive by some wild animal than to have been listened to and overheard. Fool, fool that I am! How could I have thought, how could I have said what I did?" And saying this her head bowed like the water tossed plume of a bulrush; she felt her limbs fail, and her strength abandoning her, and, gliding almost inanimate from the arms of her companions, sank down upon the turf.