

Chapter 42

The King's Uneasiness.

Let us leave poor La Valliere, who had fainted in the arms of her two companions, and return to the precincts of the royal oak. The young girls had hardly run twenty paces, when the sound which had so much alarmed them was renewed among the branches. A man's figure might indistinctly be perceived, and putting the branches of the bushes aside, he appeared upon the verge of the wood, and perceiving that the place was empty, burst out into a peal of laughter. It is almost superfluous to add that the form in question was that of a young and handsome cavalier, who immediately made a sign to another, who thereupon made his appearance.

"What, sire," said the second figure, advancing timidly, "has your majesty put our young sentimentalists to flight?"

"It seems so," said the king, "and you can show yourself without fear."

"Take care, sire, you will be recognized."

"But I tell you they are flown."

"This is a most fortunate meeting, sire; and, if I dared offer an opinion to your majesty, we ought to follow them."

"They are far enough away by this time."

"They would quickly allow themselves to be overtaken, especially if they knew who were following them."

"What do you mean by that, coxcomb that you are?"

"Why, one of them seems to have taken a fancy to me, and another compared you to the sun."

"The greater reason why we should not show ourselves, Saint-Aignan. The sun never shows itself in the night-time."

"Upon my word, sire, your majesty seems to have very little curiosity. In your place, I should like to know who are the two nymphs, the two dryads, the two hamadryads, who have so good an opinion of us."

"I shall know them again very well, I assure you, without running after them."

"By what means?"

"By their voices, of course. They belong to the court, and the one who spoke of me had a remarkably sweet voice."

"Ah! your majesty permits yourself to be influenced by flattery."

"No one will ever say it is a means you make use of."

"Forgive my stupidity, sire."

"Come; let us go and look where I told you."

"Is the passion, then, which your majesty confided to me, already forgotten?"

"Oh! no, indeed. How is it possible to forget such beautiful eyes as Mademoiselle de la Valliere has?"

"Yet the other one has a beautiful voice."

"Which one?"

"The lady who has fallen in love with the sun."

"M. de Saint-Aignan!"

"Forgive me, sire."

"Well, I am not sorry you should believe me to be an admirer of sweet voices as well as of beautiful eyes. I know you to be a terrible talker,

and to-morrow I shall have to pay for the confidence I have shown you."

"What do you mean, sire?"

"That to-morrow every one will know that I have designs upon this little La Valliere; but be careful, Saint-Aignan, I have confided my secret to no one but you, and if any one should speak to me about it, I shall know who has betrayed my secret."

"You are angry, sire."

"No; but you understand I do not wish to compromise the poor girl."

"Do not be afraid, sire."

"You promise me, then?"

"I give you my word of honor."

"Excellent," thought the king, laughing to himself; "now every one will know to-morrow that I have been running about after La Valliere to-night."

Then, endeavoring to see where he was, he said: "Why we have lost ourselves."

"Not quite so bad as that, sire."

"Where does that gate lead to?"

"To Rond-Point, sire."

"Where were we going when we heard the sound of women's voices?"

"Yes, sire, and the termination of a conversation in which I had the honor of hearing my own name pronounced by the side of your majesty's."

"You return to that subject too frequently, Saint-Aignan."

"Your majesty will forgive me, but I am delighted to know that a woman exists whose thoughts are occupied about me, without my knowledge, and without my having done anything to deserve it. Your majesty cannot comprehend this satisfaction, for your rank and merit attract attention, and compel regard."

"No, no, Saint-Aignan, believe me or not, as you like," said the king, leaning familiarly upon Saint-Aignan's arm and taking the path he thought would lead them to the chateau; "but this candid confession, this perfectly disinterested preference of one who will, perhaps, never attract my attention - in one word, the mystery of this adventure excites me, and the truth is, that if I were not so taken with La Valliere - "

"Do not let that interfere with your majesty's intentions: you have time enough before you."

"What do you mean?"

"La Valliere is said to be very strict in her ideas."

"You excite my curiosity and I am anxious to see her again. Come, let us walk on."

The king spoke untruly, for nothing, on the contrary, could make him less anxious, but he had a part to play, and so he walked on hurriedly. Saint-Aignan followed him at a short distance. Suddenly the king stopped; the courtier followed his example.

"Saint-Aignan," he said, "do you not hear some one moaning?"

"Yes, sire, and weeping, too, it seems."

"It is in this direction," said the king. "It sounds like the tears and sobs of a woman."

"Run," said the king; and, following a by-path, they ran across the grass. As they approached, the cries were more distinctly heard.

"Help, help," exclaimed two voices. The king and his companion redoubled

their speed, and, as they approached nearer, the sighs they had heard were changed into loud sobs. The cry of "Help! help!" was again repeated; at the sound of which, the king and Saint-Aignan increased the rapidity of their pace. Suddenly at the other side of a ditch, under the branches of a willow, they perceived a woman on her knees, holding another in her arms who seemed to have fainted. A few paces from them, a third, standing in the middle of the path, was calling for assistance. Perceiving the two gentlemen, whose rank she could not tell, her cries for assistance were redoubled. The king, who was in advance of his companion, leaped across the ditch, and reached the group at the very moment when, from the end of the path which led to the chateau, a dozen persons were approaching, who had been drawn to the spot by the same cries that had attracted the attention of the king and M. de Saint-Aignan.

"What is the matter, young ladies?" said Louis.

"The king!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Montalais, in her astonishment, letting La Valliere's head fall upon the ground.

"Yes, it is the king; but that is no reason why you should abandon your companion. Who is she?"

"It is Mademoiselle de la Valliere, sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere!"

"Yes, sire, she has just fainted."

"Poor child!" said the king. "Quick, quick, fetch a surgeon." But however great the anxiety with which the king had pronounced these words may have seemed to others, he had not so carefully schooled himself but that they appeared, as well as the gesture which accompanied them, somewhat cold to Saint-Aignan, to whom the king had confided the sudden love with which she had inspired him.

"Saint-Aignan," continued the king, "watch over Mademoiselle de la Valliere, I beg. Send for a surgeon. I will hasten forward and inform Madame of the accident which has befallen one of her maids of honor." And, in fact, while M. de Saint-Aignan was busily engaged in making preparations for carrying Mademoiselle de la Valliere to the chateau, the king hurried forward, happy to have an opportunity of approaching Madame, and of speaking to her under a colorable pretext. Fortunately, a carriage was passing; the coachman was told to stop, and the persons who were inside, having been informed of the accident, eagerly gave up their seats to Mademoiselle de la Valliere. The current of fresh air produced by the rapid motion of the carriage soon recalled her to her senses. Having reached the chateau, she was able, though very weak, to alight from the carriage, and, with the assistance of Athenais and of Montalais, to reach the inner apartments. They made her sit down in one of the rooms of the ground floor. After a while, as the accident had not produced much effect upon those who had been walking, the promenade was

resumed. During this time, the king had found Madame beneath a tree with overhanging branches, and had seated himself by her side.

"Take care, sire," said Henrietta to him, in a low tone, "you do not show yourself as indifferent as you ought to be."

"Alas!" replied the king, in the same tone, "I much fear we have entered into an agreement above our strength to keep." He then added aloud, "You have heard of the accident, I suppose?"

"What accident?"

"Oh! in seeing you I forgot I hurried here expressly to tell you of it. I am, however, painfully affected by it; one of your maids of honor, Mademoiselle de la Valliere, has just fainted."

"Indeed! poor girl," said the princess, quietly, "what was the cause of it?"

She then added in an undertone, "You forget, sire, that you wish others to believe in your passion for this girl, and yet you remain here while she is almost dying, perhaps, elsewhere."

"Ah! Madame," said the king, sighing, "how much more perfect you are in your part than I am, and how actively you think of everything."

He then rose, saying loud enough for every one to hear him, "Permit me to leave you, Madame; my uneasiness is very great, and I wish to be quite certain, myself, that proper attention has been given to Mademoiselle de la Valliere." And the king left again to return to La Valliere, while those who had been present commented upon the king's remark: - "My uneasiness is very great."