

## Chapter 43

### The King's Secret.

On his way Louis met the Comte de Saint-Aignan. "Well, Saint-Aignan," he inquired, with affected interest, "how is the invalid."

"Really, sire," stammered Saint-Aignan, "to my shame, I confess I do not know."

"What! you do not know?" said the king, pretending to take in a serious manner this want of attention for the object of his predilection.

"Will your majesty pardon me; but I have just met one of our three loquacious wood-nymphs, and I confess that my attention has been taken away from other matters."

"Ah!" said the king, eagerly, "you have found, then - "

"The one who deigned to speak of me in such advantageous terms; and, having found mine, I was searching for yours, sire, when I had the happiness to meet your majesty."

"Very well; but Mademoiselle de la Valliere before everything else," said the king, faithful to the character he had assumed."

"Oh! our charming invalid!" said Saint-Aignan; "how fortunately her

fainting fit came on, since your majesty had already occupied yourself about her."

"What is the name of your fair lady, Saint-Aignan? Is it a secret?"

"It ought to be a secret, and a very great one, even; but your majesty is well aware that no secret can possibly exist for you."

"Well, what is her name?"

"Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Is she pretty?"

"Exceedingly, sire; and I recognized the voice which pronounced my name in such tender accents. I accosted her, questioned her as well as I was able to do, in the midst of the crowd; and she told me, without suspecting anything, that a little while ago she was under the great oak, with her two friends, when the sound of a wolf or a robber had terrified them, and made them run away."

"But," inquired the king, anxiously, "what are the names of these two friends?"

"Sire," said Saint-Aignan, "will your majesty send me forthwith to the Bastile?"

"What for?"

"Because I am an egotist and a fool. My surprise was so great at such a conquest, and at so fortunate a discovery, that I went no further in my inquiries. Besides, I did not think that your majesty would attach any very great importance to what you heard, knowing how much your attention was taken up by Mademoiselle de la Valliere; and then, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente left me precipitately, to return to Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Let us hope, then, that I shall be as fortunate as yourself. Come, Saint-Aignan."

"Your majesty is ambitious, I perceive, and does not wish to allow any conquest to escape you. Well, I assure you that I will conscientiously set about my inquiries; and, moreover, from one or the other of those Three Graces we shall learn the names of the rest, and by the names their secrets."

"I, too," said the king, "only require to hear her voice to know it again. Come, let us say no more about it, but show me where poor La Valliere is."

"Well," thought Saint-Aignan, "the king's regard is beginning to display itself, and for that girl too. It is extraordinary; I should never have

believed it." And with this thought passing through his mind, he showed the king the room to which La Valliere had been carried; the king entered, followed by Saint-Aignan. In a low chamber, near a large window looking out upon the gardens, La Valliere, reclining in a large armchair, was inhaling deep draughts of the perfumed evening breeze. From the loosened body of her dress, the lace fell in tumbled folds, mingling with the tresses of her beautiful fair hair, which lay scattered upon her shoulders. Her languishing eyes were filled with tears; she seemed as lifeless as those beautiful visions of our dreams, that pass before the mental eye of the sleeper, half-opening their wings without moving them, unclosing their lips without a sound escaping them. The pearl-like pallor of La Valliere possessed a charm it would be impossible to describe. Mental and bodily suffering had produced upon her features a soft and noble expression of grief; from the perfect passiveness of her arms and bust, she more resembled one whose soul had passed away, than a living being; she seemed not to hear either of the whisperings which arose from the court. She seemed to be communing within herself; and her beautiful, delicate hands trembled from time to time as though at the contact of some invisible touch. She was so completely absorbed in her reverie, that the king entered without her perceiving him. At a distance he gazed upon her lovely face, upon which the moon shed its pure silvery light.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, with a terror he could not control, "she is dead."

"No, sire," said Montalais, in a low voice; "on the contrary, she is better. Are you not better, Louise?"

But Louise did not answer. "Louise," continued Montalais, "the king has deigned to express his uneasiness on your account."

"The king!" exclaimed Louise, starting up abruptly, as if a stream of fire had started through her frame to her heart; "the king uneasy about me?"

"Yes," said Montalais.

"The king is here, then?" said La Valliere, not venturing to look round her.

"That voice! that voice!" whispered Louis, eagerly, to Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, it is so," replied Saint-Aignan; "your majesty is right; it is she who declared her love for the sun."

"Hush!" said the king. And then approaching La Valliere, he said, "You are not well, Mademoiselle de la Valliere? Just now, indeed, in the park, I saw that you had fainted. How were you attacked?"

"Sire," stammered out the poor child, pale and trembling, "I really do

not know."

"You have been walking too far," said the king; "and fatigue, perhaps - "

"No, sire," said Montalais, eagerly, answering for her friend, "it could not be from fatigue, for we passed most of the evening seated beneath the royal oak."

"Under the royal oak?" returned the king, starting. "I was not deceived; it is as I thought." And he directed a look of intelligence at the comte.

"Yes," said Saint-Aignan, "under the royal oak, with Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"How do you know that?" inquired Montalais.

"In a very simple way. Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente told me so."

"In that case, she probably told you the cause of Mademoiselle de la Valliere's fainting?"

"Why, yes; she told me something about a wolf or a robber. I forget precisely which." La Valliere listened, her eyes fixed, her bosom heaving, as if, gifted with an acuteness of perception, she foresaw a portion of the truth. Louis imagined this attitude and agitation to be the consequence of a terror only partially reassured. "Nay, fear

nothing," he said, with a rising emotion which he could not conceal; "the wolf which terrified you so much was simply a wolf with two legs."

"It was a man, then!" said Louise; "it was a man who was listening?"

"Suppose it was so, mademoiselle, what great harm was there in his having listened? Is it likely that, even in your own opinion, you would have said anything which could not have been listened to?"

La Valliere wrung her hands, and hid her face in them, as if to hide her blushes. "In Heaven's name," she said, "who was concealed there? Who was listening?"

The king advanced towards her, to take hold of one of her hands. "It was I," he said, bowing with marked respect. "Is it likely I could have frightened you?" La Valliere uttered a loud cry; for the second time her strength forsook her; and moaning in utter despair, she again fell lifeless in her chair. The king had just time to hold out his arm; so that she was partially supported by him. Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Montalais, who stood a few paces from the king and La Valliere, motionless and almost petrified at the recollection of their conversation with La Valliere, did not even think of offering their assistance, feeling restrained by the presence of the king, who, with one knee on the ground, held La Valliere round the waist with his arm.

"You heard, sire!" murmured Athenais. But the king did not reply; he

remained with his eyes fixed upon La Valliere's half-closed eyes, and held her quiescent hand in his own.

"Of course," replied Saint-Aignan, who, on his side, hoping that Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, too, would faint, advancing towards her, holding his arms extended, - "of course; we did not even lose a single word." But the haughty Athenais was not a woman to faint easily; she darted a terrible look at Saint-Aignan, and fled. Montalais, with more courage, advanced hurriedly towards Louise, and received her from the king's hands, who was already fast losing his presence of mind, as he felt his face covered by the perfumed tresses of the seemingly dying girl. "Excellent," whispered Saint-Aignan. "This is indeed an adventure; and it will be my own fault if I am not the first to relate it."

The king approached him, and, with a trembling voice and a passionate gesture, said, "Not a syllable, comte."

The poor king forgot that, only an hour before, he had given him a similar recommendation, but with the very opposite intention; namely, that the comte should be indiscreet. It followed, as a matter of course, that the latter recommendation was quite as unnecessary as the former. Half an hour afterwards, everybody in Fontainebleau knew that Mademoiselle de la Valliere had had a conversation under the royal oak with Montalais and Tonnay-Charente, and that in this conversation she had confessed her affection for the king. It was known, also, that the king,



after having manifested the uneasiness with which Mademoiselle de la Valliere's health had inspired him, had turned pale, and trembled very much as he received the beautiful girl fainting into his arms; so that it was quite agreed among the courtiers, that the greatest event of the period had just been revealed; that his majesty loved Mademoiselle de la Valliere, and that, consequently, Monsieur could now sleep in perfect tranquillity. It was this, even, that the queen-mother, as surprised as the others by the sudden change, hastened to tell the young queen and Philip d'Orleans. Only she set to work in a different manner, by attacking them in the following way: - To her daughter-in-law she said, "See, now, Therese, how very wrong you were to accuse the king; now it is said he is devoted to some other person; why should there be any greater truth in the report of to-day than in that of yesterday, or in that of yesterday than in that of to-day?" To Monsieur, in relating to him the adventure of the royal oak, she said, "Are you not very absurd in your jealousies, my dear Philip? It is asserted that the king is madly in love with that little La Valliere. Say nothing of it to your wife; for the queen will know all about it very soon." This latter confidential communication had an immediate result. Monsieur, who had regained his composure, went triumphantly to look after his wife, and it was not yet midnight and the *\_fete\_* was to continue until two in the morning, he offered her his hand for a promenade. At the end of a few paces, however, the first thing he did was to disobey his mother's injunctions.

"Do not tell any one, the queen least of all," he said mysteriously, "what people say about the king."

"What do they say about him?" inquired Madame.

"That my brother has suddenly fallen in love."

"With whom?"

"With Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

As it was dark, Madame could smile at her ease.

"Ah!" she said, "and how long is it since this has been the case?"

"For some days, it seems. But that was nothing but nonsense; it is only this evening that he has revealed his passion."

"The king shows his good taste," said Madame; "in my opinion she is a very charming girl."

"I verily believe you are jesting."

"I! in what way?"

"In any case this passion will make some one very happy, even if it be only La Valliere herself."

"Really," continued the princess, "you speak as if you had read into the inmost recesses of La Valliere's heart. Who has told you that she agrees to return the king's affection?"

"And who has told you that she will not return it?"

"She loves the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"You think so?"

"She is even affianced to him."

"She was so."

"What do you mean?"

"When they went to ask the king's permission to arrange the marriage, he refused his permission."

"Refused?"

"Yes, although the request was preferred by the Comte de la Fere himself, for whom the king has the greatest regard, on account of the part he took in your royal brother's restoration, and in other events, also, which happened a long time ago."

"Well! the poor lovers must wait until the king is pleased to change his opinion; they are young, and there is time enough."

"But, dear me," said Philip, laughing, "I perceive you do not know the best part of the affair."

"No!"

"That by which the king was most deeply touched."

"The king, do you say, has been deeply touched?"

"To the very quick of his heart."

"But how? - in what manner? - tell me directly."

"By an adventure, the romance of which cannot be equalled."

"You know how I love to hear of such adventures, and yet you keep me waiting," said the princess, impatiently.

"Well, then - " and Monsieur paused.

"I am listening."

"Under the royal oak - you know where the royal oak is?"

"What can that matter? Under the royal oak, you were saying?"

"Well! Mademoiselle de la Valliere, fancying herself to be alone with her two friends, revealed to them her affection for the king."

"Ah!" said Madame, beginning to be uneasy, "her affection for the king?"

"Yes."

"When was this?"

"About an hour ago."

Madame started, and then said, "And no one knew of this affection?"

"No one."

"Not even his majesty?"

"Not even his majesty. The artful little puss kept her secret strictly to herself, when suddenly it proved stronger than herself, and so escaped her."

"And from whom did you get this absurd tale?"

"Why, as everybody else did, from La Valliere herself, who confessed her love to Montalais and Tonnay-Charente, who were her companions."

Madame stopped suddenly, and by a hasty movement let go her husband's hand.

"Did you say it was an hour ago she made this confession?" Madame inquired.

"About that time."

"Is the king aware of it?"

"Why, that is the very thing which constitutes the perfect romance of the affair, for the king was behind the royal oak with Saint-Aignan, and heard the whole of the interesting conversation without losing a single word of it."

Madame felt struck to the heart, saying incautiously, "But I have seen the king since, and he never told me a word about it."

"Of course," said Monsieur; "he took care not to speak of it to you himself, since he recommended every one not to say a word about it."

"What do you mean?" said Madame, growing angry.

"I mean that they wished to keep you in ignorance of the affair altogether."

"But why should they wish to conceal it from me?"

"From the fear that your friendship for the young queen might induce you to say something about it to her, nothing more."

Madame hung down her head; her feelings were grievously wounded. She could not enjoy a moment's repose until she had met the king. As a king is, most naturally, the very last person in his kingdom who knows what is said about him, in the same way that a lover is the only one who is kept in ignorance of what is said about his mistress, therefore, when the king perceived Madame, who was looking for him, he approached her in some perturbation, but still gracious and attentive in his manner. Madame waited for him to speak about La Valliere first; but as he did not speak of her, she said, "And the poor girl?"

"What poor girl?" said the king.

"La Valliere. Did you not tell me, sire, that she had fainted?"

"She is still very ill," said the king, affecting the greatest indifference.

"But surely that will prejudicially affect the rumor you were going to

spread, sire?"

"What rumor?"

"That your attention was taken up by her."

"Oh!" said the king, carelessly, "I trust it will be reported all the same."

Madame still waited; she wished to know if the king would speak to her of the adventure of the royal oak. But the king did not say a word about it. Madame, on her side, did not open her lips about it; so that the king took leave of her without having reposed the slightest confidence in her. Hardly had she watched the king move away, than she set out in search of Saint-Aignan. Saint-Aignan was never very difficult to find; he was like the smaller vessels that always follow in the wake of, and as tenders to, the larger ships. Saint-Aignan was the very man whom Madame needed in her then state of mind. And as for him, he only looked for worthier ears than others he had found to have an opportunity of recounting the event in all its details. And so he did not spare Madame a single word of the whole affair. When he had finished, Madame said to him, "Confess, now, that is his all a charming invention."

"Invention, no; a true story, yes."

"Confess, whether invention or true story, that it was told to you as you



have told it to me, but that you were not there."

"Upon my honor, Madame, I was there."

"And you think that these confessions may have made an impression on the king?"

"Certainly, as those of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente did upon me," replied Saint-Aignan; "do not forget, Madame, that Mademoiselle de la Valliere compared the king to the sun; that was flattering enough."

"The king does not permit himself to be influenced by such flatteries."

"Madame, the king is just as much Adonis as Apollo; and I saw plain enough just now when La Valliere fell into his arms."

"La Valliere fell into the king's arms!"

"Oh! it was the most graceful picture possible; just imagine, La Valliere had fallen back fainting, and - "

"Well! what did you see? - tell me - speak!"

"I saw what ten other people saw at the same time as myself; I saw that when La Valliere fell into his arms, the king almost fainted himself."

Madame smothered a subdued cry, the only indication of her smothered anger.

"Thank you," she said, laughing in a convulsive manner, "you relate stories delightfully, M. de Saint-Aignan." And she hurried away, alone, and almost suffocated by painful emotion, towards the chateau.