

Chapter 44

Courses de Nuit.

Monsieur quitted the princess in the best possible humor, and feeling greatly fatigued, retired to his apartments, leaving every one to finish the night as he chose. When in his room, Monsieur began to dress for the night with careful attention, which displayed itself from time to time in paroxysms of satisfaction. While his attendants were engaged in curling his hair, he sang the principal airs of the ballet which the violins had played, and to which the king had danced. He then summoned his tailors, inspected his costumes for the next day, and, in token of his extreme satisfaction, distributed various presents among them. As, however, the Chevalier de Lorraine, who had seen the prince return to the chateau, entered the room, Monsieur overwhelmed him with kindness. The former, after having saluted the prince, remained silent for a moment, like a sharpshooter who deliberates before deciding in what direction he will renew his fire; then, seeming to make up his mind, he said, "Have you remarked a very singular coincidence, monseigneur?"

"No; what is it?"

"The bad reception which his majesty, in appearance, gave the Comte de Guiche."

"In appearance?"

"Yes, certainly; since, in reality, he has restored him to favor."

"I did not notice it," said the prince.

"What, did you not remark, that, instead of ordering him to go away again into exile, as was natural, he encouraged him in his opposition by permitting him to resume his place in the ballet?"

"And you think the king was wrong, chevalier?" said the prince.

"Are you not of my opinion, prince?"

"Not altogether so, my dear chevalier; and I think the king was quite right not to have made a disturbance against a poor fellow whose want of judgment is more to be complained of than his intention."

"Really," said the chevalier, "as far as I am concerned, I confess that this magnanimity astonishes me to the highest degree."

"Why so?" inquired Philip.

"Because I should have thought the king had been more jealous," replied the chevalier, spitefully. During the last few minutes Monsieur had felt there was something of an irritating nature concealed under his favorite's remarks; this last word, however, ignited the powder.

"Jealous!" exclaimed the prince. "Jealous! what do you mean? Jealous of what, if you please - or jealous of whom?"

The chevalier perceived that he had allowed an excessively mischievous remark to escape him, as he was in the habit of doing. He endeavored, therefore, apparently to recall it while it was still possible to do so.

"Jealous of his authority," he said, with an assumed frankness; "of what else would you have the king jealous?"

"Ah!" said the prince, "that's very proper."

"Did your royal highness," continued the chevalier, "solicit dear De Guiche's pardon?"

"No, indeed," said Monsieur. "De Guiche is an excellent fellow, and full of courage; but as I do not approve of his conduct with Madame, I wish him neither harm nor good."

The chevalier had assumed a bitterness with regard to De Guiche, as he had attempted to do with regard to the king; but he thought he perceived that the time for indulgence, and even for the utmost indifference, had arrived, and that, in order to throw some light on the question, it might be necessary for him to put the lamp, as the saying is, beneath the husband's very nose.

"Very well, very well," said the chevalier to himself, "I must wait for

De Wardes; he will do more in one day than I in a month; for I verily believe he is even more envious than I. Then, again, it is not De Wardes I require so much as that some event or another should happen; and in the whole of this affair I see none. That De Guiche returned after he had been sent away is certainly serious enough, but all its seriousness disappears when I learn that De Guiche has returned at the very moment Madame troubles herself no longer about him. Madame, in fact, is occupied with the king, that is clear; but she will not be so much longer if, as it is asserted, the king has ceased to trouble his head about her. The moral of the whole matter is, to remain perfectly neutral, and await the arrival of some new caprice and let that decide the whole affair." And the chevalier thereupon settled himself resignedly in the armchair in which Monsieur permitted him to seat himself in his presence, and, having no more spiteful or malicious remarks to make, the consequence was that De Lorraine's wit seemed to have deserted him. Most fortunately Monsieur was in high good-humor, and he had enough for two, until the time arrived for dismissing his servants and gentlemen of the chamber, and he passed into his sleeping-apartment. As he withdrew, he desired the chevalier to present his compliments to Madame, and say that, as the night was cool, Monsieur, who was afraid of the toothache, would not venture out again into the park during the remainder of the evening. The chevalier entered the princess's apartments at the very moment she came in herself. He acquitted himself faithfully of the commission intrusted to him, and, in the first place, remarked all the indifference and annoyance with which Madame received her husband's communication

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circumstance which appeared to him fraught with something fresh. If Madame had been about to leave her apartments with that strangeness of manner, he would have followed her; but she was returning to them; there was nothing to be done, therefore he turned upon his heel like an unemployed heron, appearing to question earth, air, and water about it; shook his head, and walked away mechanically in the direction of the gardens. He had hardly gone a hundred paces when he met two young men, walking arm in arm, with their heads bent down, and idly kicking the small stones out of their path as they walked on, plunged in thought. It was De Guiche and De Bragelonne, the sight of whom, as it always did, produced upon the chevalier, instinctively, a feeling of repugnance. He did not, however, the less, on that account, salute them with a very low bow, which they returned with interest. Then, observing that the park was nearly deserted, that the illuminations began to burn out, and that the morning breeze was setting in, he turned to the left, and entered the chateau again, by one of the smaller courtyards. The others turned aside to the right, and continued on their way towards the large park. As the chevalier was ascending the side staircase, which led to the private entrance, he saw a woman, followed by another, make her appearance under the arcade which led from the small to the large courtyard. The two women walked so fast that the rustling of their dresses could be distinguished through the silence of the night. The style of their mantles, their graceful figures, a mysterious yet haughty carriage which distinguished them both, especially the one who walked first, struck the chevalier.

"I certainly know those two," he said to himself, pausing upon the top step of the small staircase. Then, as with the instinct of a bloodhound he was about to follow them, one of the servants who had been running after him arrested his attention.

"Monsieur," he said, "the courier has arrived."

"Very well," said the chevalier, "there is time enough; to-morrow will do."

"There are some urgent letters which you would be glad to see, perhaps."

"Where from?" inquired the chevalier.

"One from England, and the other from Calais; the latter arrived by express, and seems of great importance."

"From Calais! Who the deuce can have to write to me from Calais?"

"I think I recognize the handwriting of Monsieur le Comte de Wardes."

"Oh!" cried the chevalier, forgetting his intention of acting the spy, "in that case I will come up at once." This he did, while the two unknown beings disappeared at the end of the court opposite to the one by which they had just entered. We shall now follow them, and leave the

chevalier undisturbed to his correspondence. When they had arrived at the grove of trees, the foremost of the two halted, somewhat out of breath, and, cautiously raising her hood, said, "Are we still far from the tree?"

"Yes, Madame, more than five hundred paces; but pray rest awhile, you will not be able to walk much longer at this rate."

"You are right," said the princes, for it was she; and she leaned against a tree. "And now," she resumed, after having recovered her breath, "tell me the whole truth, and conceal nothing from me."

"Oh, Madame," cried the young girl, "you are already angry with me."

"No, my dear Athenais, reassure yourself, I am in no way angry with you. After all, these things do not concern me personally. You are anxious about what you may have said under the oak; you are afraid of having offended the king, and I wish to tranquillize you by ascertaining myself if it were possible you could have been overheard."

"Oh, yes, Madame, the king was close to us."

"Still, you were not speaking so loud that some of your remarks may not have been lost."

"We thought we were quite alone, Madame."

"There were three of you, you say?"

"Yes; La Valliere, Montalais, and myself."

"And you, individually, spoke in a light manner of the king?"

"I am afraid so. Should such be the case, will your highness have the kindness to make my peace with his majesty?"

"If there should be any occasion for it, I promise you I will do so. However, as I have already told you, it will be better not to anticipate evil. The night is now very dark, and the darkness is still greater under the trees. It is not likely you were recognized by the king. To inform him of it, by being the first to speak, is to denounce yourself."

"Oh, Madame, Madame! if Mademoiselle de la Valliere were recognized, I must have been recognized also. Besides, M. de Saint-Aignan left no doubt on the subject."

"Did you, then, say anything very disrespectful of the king?"

"Not at all; it was one of the others who made some very flattering speeches about the king; and my remarks must have been much in contrast with hers."

"Montalais is such a giddy girl," said Madame.

"It was not Montalais. Montalais said nothing; it was La Valliere."

Madame started as if she had not known it perfectly well already. "No, no," she said, "the king cannot have heard. Besides, we will now try the experiment for which we came out. Show me the oak. Do you know where it is?" she continued.

"Alas! Madame, yes."

"And you can find it again?"

"With my eyes shut."

"Very well; sit down on the bank where you were, where La Valliere was, and speak in the same tone and to the same effect as you did before; I will conceal myself in the thicket, and if I can hear you, I will tell you so."

"Yes, Madame."

"If, therefore, you really spoke loud enough for the king to have heard you, in that case - "

Athenais seemed to await the conclusion of the sentence with some anxiety.

"In that case," said Madame, in a suffocated voice, arising doubtless from her hurried progress, "in that case, I forbid you - " And Madame again increased her pace. Suddenly, however, she stopped. "An idea occurs to me," she said.

"A good idea, no doubt, Madame," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente.

"Montalais must be as much embarrassed as La Valliere and yourself."

"Less so, for she is less compromised, having said less."

"That does not matter; she will help you, I dare say, by deviating a little from the exact truth."

"Especially if she knows that your highness is kind enough to interest yourself about me."

"Very well, I think I have discovered what it is best for you all to pretend."

"How delightful."

"You had better say that all three of you were perfectly well aware that the king was behind the tree, or behind the thicket, whichever it might

have been; and that you knew M. de Saint-Aignan was there too."

"Yes, Madame."

"For you cannot disguise it from yourself, Athenais, Saint-Aignan takes advantage of some very flattering remarks you made about him."

"Well, Madame, you see very clearly that one can be overheard," cried Athenais, "since M. de Saint-Aignan overheard us."

Madame bit her lips, for she had thoughtlessly committed herself. "Oh, you know Saint-Aignan's character very well," she said, "the favor the king shows him almost turns his brain, and he talks at random; not only so, he very often invents. That is not the question; the fact remains, did or did not the king overhear?"

"Oh, yes, Madame, he certainly did," said Athenais, in despair.

"In that case, do what I said: maintain boldly that all three of you knew - mind, all three of you, for if there is a doubt about any one of you, there will be a doubt about all, - persist, I say, that you knew that the king and M. de Saint-Aignan were there, and that you wished to amuse yourself at the expense of those who were listening."

"Oh, Madame, at the king's expense; we shall never dare say that!"

"It is a simple jest; an innocent deception readily permitted in young girls whom men wish to take by surprise. In this manner everything explains itself. What Montalais said of Malicorne, a mere jest; what you said of M. de Saint-Aignan, a mere jest too; and what La Valliere might have said of - "

"And which she would have given anything to recall."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well, an additional reason. Say the whole affair was a mere joke. M. de Malicorne will have no occasion to get out of temper; M. de Saint-Aignan will be completely put out of countenance; he will be laughed at instead of you; and lastly, the king will be punished for a curiosity unworthy of his rank. Let people laugh a little at the king in this affair, and I do not think he will complain of it."

"Oh, Madame, you are indeed an angel of goodness and sense!"

"It is to my own advantage."

"In what way?"

"How can you ask me why it is to my advantage to spare my maids of honor

the remarks, annoyances, perhaps even calumnies, that might follow?
Alas! you well know that the court has no indulgence for this sort of
peccadillo. But we have now been walking for some time, shall we be long
before we reach it?"

"About fifty or sixty paces further; turn to the left, Madame, if you
please."

"And you are sure of Montalais?" said Madame.

"Oh, certainly."

"Will she do what you ask her?"

"Everything. She will be delighted."

"And La Valliere - " ventured the princess.

"Ah, there will be some difficulty with her, Madame; she would scorn to
tell a falsehood."

"Yet, when it is in her interest to do so - "

"I am afraid that that would not make the slightest difference in her
ideas."

"Yes, yes," said Madame. "I have been already told that; she is one of those overnice and affectedly particular people who place heaven in the foreground in order to conceal themselves behind it. But if she refuses to tell a falsehood, - as she will expose herself to the jests of the whole court, as she will have annoyed the king by a confession as ridiculous as it was immodest, - Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc de la Valliere will think it but proper I should send her back again to her pigeons in the country, in order that, in Touraine yonder, or in Le Blaisois, - I know not where it may be, - she may at her ease study sentiment and pastoral life combined."

These words were uttered with a vehemence and harshness that terrified Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; and the consequence was, that, as far as she was concerned, she promised to tell as many falsehoods as might be necessary. It was in this frame of mind that Madame and her companion reached the precincts of the royal oak.

"Here we are," said Tonnay-Charente.

"We shall soon learn if one can overhear," replied Madame.

"Hush!" whispered the young girl, holding Madame back with a hurried gesture, entirely forgetful of her companion's rank. Madame stopped.

"You see that you can hear," said Athenais.

"How?"

"Listen."

Madame held her breath; and, in fact, the following words pronounced by a gentle and melancholy voice, floated towards them:

"I tell you, vicomte, I tell you I love her madly; I tell you I love her to distraction."

Madame started at the voice; and, beneath her hood, a bright joyous smile illumined her features. It was she who now held back her companion, and with a light step leading her some twenty paces away, that is to say, out of the reach of the voice, she said, "Remain here, my dear Athenais, and let no one surprise us. I think it must be you they are conversing about."

"Me, Madame?"

"Yes, you - or rather your adventure. I will go and listen; if we were both there, we should be discovered. Or, stay! - go and fetch Montalais, and then return and wait for me with her at the entrance of the forest." And then, as Athenais hesitated, she again said "Go!" in a voice which did not admit of reply. Athenais thereupon arranged her dress so as to prevent its rustling being heard; and, by a path beyond the group of trees, she regained the flower-garden. As for Madame, she concealed

herself in the thicket, leaning her back against a gigantic chestnut-tree, one of the branches of which had been cut in such a manner as to form a seat, and waited there, full of anxiety and apprehension. "Now," she said, "since one can hear from this place, let us listen to what M. de Bragelonne and that other madly-in-love fool, the Comte de Guiche, have to say about me."