

Chapter 45

In Which Madame Acquires a Proof that Listeners Hear What Is Said.

There was a moment's silence, as if the mysterious sounds of night were hushed to listen, at the same time as Madame, to the youthful passionate disclosures of De Guiche.

Raoul was about to speak. He leaned indolently against the trunk of the large oak, and replied in his sweet and musical voice, "Alas, my dear De Guiche, it is a great misfortune."

"Yes," cried the latter, "great indeed."

"You do not understand me, De Guiche. I say that it is a great misfortune for you, not merely loving, but not knowing how to conceal your love."

"What do you mean?" said De Guiche.

"Yes, you do not perceive one thing; namely, that it is no longer to the only friend you have, - in other words, - to a man who would rather die than betray you; you do not perceive, I say, that it is no longer to your only friend that you confide your passion, but to the first person that approaches you."

"Are you mad, Bragelonne," exclaimed De Guiche, "to say such a thing to

me?"

"The fact stands thus, however."

"Impossible! How, in what manner can I have ever been indiscreet to such an extent?"

"I mean, that your eyes, your looks, your sighs, proclaim, in spite of yourself, that exaggerated feeling which leads and hurries a man beyond his own control. In such a case he ceases to be master of himself; he is a prey to a mad passion, that makes him confide his grief to the trees, or to the air, from the very moment he has no longer any living being in reach of his voice. Besides, remember this: it very rarely happens that there is not always some one present to hear, especially the very things which ought not to be heard." De Guiche uttered a deep sigh. "Nay," continued Bragelonne, "you distress me; since your return here, you have a thousand times, and in a thousand different ways, confessed your love for her; and yet, had you not said one word, your return alone would have been a terrible indiscretion. I persist, then, in drawing this conclusion; that if you do not place a better watch over yourself than you have hitherto done, one day or other something will happen that will cause an explosion. Who will save you then? Answer me. Who will save her? for, innocent as she will be of your affection, your affection will be an accusation against her in the hands of her enemies."

"Alas!" murmured De Guiche; and a deep sigh accompanied the exclamation.

"That is not answering me, De Guiche."

"Yes, yes."

"Well, what reply have you to make?"

"This, that when the day arrives I shall be no more a living being than I feel myself now."

"I do not understand you."

"So many vicissitudes have worn me out. At present, I am no more a thinking, acting being; at present, the most worthless of men is better than I am; my remaining strength is exhausted, my latest-formed resolutions have vanished, and I abandon myself to my fate. When a man is out campaigning, as we have been together, and he sets off alone and unaccompanied for a skirmish, it sometimes happens that he may meet with a party of five or six foragers, and although alone, he defends himself; afterwards, five or six others arrive unexpectedly, his anger is aroused and he persists; but if six, eight, or ten others should still be met with, he either sets spurs to his horse, if he should still happen to retain one, or lets himself be slain to save an ignominious flight. Such, indeed, is my own case: first, I had to struggle against myself;

afterwards, against Buckingham; now, since the king is in the field, I will not contend against the king, nor even, I wish you to understand, will the king retire; nor even against the nature of that woman. Still I do not deceive myself; having devoted myself to the service of such a love, I will lose my life in it."

"It is not the lady you ought to reproach," replied Raoul; "it is yourself."

"Why so?"

"You know the princess's character, - somewhat giddy, easily captivated by novelty, susceptible to flattery, whether it come from a blind person or a child, and yet you allow your passion for her to eat your very life away. Look at her, - love her, if you will, - for no one whose heart is not engaged elsewhere can see her without loving her. Yet, while you love her, respect, in the first place, her husband's rank, then herself, and lastly, your own safety."

"Thanks, Raoul."

"What for?"

"Because, seeing how much I suffer through this woman, you endeavor to console me, because you tell me all the good of her you think, and perhaps even that which you do not think."

"Oh," said Raoul, "there you are wrong, comte; what I think I do not always say, but in that case I say nothing; but when I speak, I know not how to feign or to deceive; and whoever listens to me may believe me."

During this conversation, Madame, her head stretched forward with eager ear and dilated glance, endeavoring to penetrate the obscurity, thirstily drank in the faintest sound of their voices.

"Oh, I know her better than you do, then!" exclaimed Guiche. "She is not merely giddy, but frivolous; she is not only attracted by novelty, she is utterly oblivious, and is without faith; she is not simply susceptible to flattery, she is a practiced and cruel coquette. A thorough coquette! yes, yes, I am sure of it. Believe me, Bragelonne, I am suffering all the torments of hell; brave, passionately fond of danger, I meet a danger greater than my strength and my courage. But, believe me, Raoul, I reserve for myself a victory which shall cost her floods of tears."

"A victory," he asked, "and of what kind?"

"Of what kind, you ask?"

"Yes."

"One day I will accost her, and will address her thus: 'I was young – madly in love, I possessed, however, sufficient respect to throw myself

at your feet, and to prostrate myself in the dust, if your looks had not raised me to your hand. I fancied I understood your looks, I rose, and then, without having done anything more towards you than love you yet more devotedly, if that were possible - you, a woman without heart, faith, or love, in very wantonness, dashed me down again from sheer caprice. You are unworthy, princess of the royal blood though you may be, of the love of a man of honor; I offer my life as a sacrifice for having loved you too tenderly, and I die despairing you."

"Oh!" cried Raoul, terrified at the accents of profound truth which De Guiche's words betrayed, "I was right in saying you were mad, Guiche."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed De Guiche, following out his own idea; "since there are no wars here now, I will flee yonder to the north, seek service in the Empire, where some Hungarian, or Croat, or Turk, will perhaps kindly put me out of my misery." De Guiche did not finish, or rather as he finished, a sound made him start, and at the same moment caused Raoul to leap to his feet. As for De Guiche, buried in his own thoughts, he remained seated, with his head tightly pressed between his hands. The branches of the tree were pushed aside, and a woman, pale and much agitated, appeared before the two young men. With one hand she held back the branches, which would have struck her face, and, with the other, she raised the hood of the mantle which covered her shoulders. By her clear and lustrous glance, by her lofty carriage, by her haughty attitude, and, more than all that, by the throbbing of his own heart, De Guiche recognized Madame, and, uttering a loud cry, he removed his hands from

his temple, and covered his eyes with them. Raoul, trembling and out of countenance, merely muttered a few words of respect.

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," said the princess, "have the goodness, I beg, to see if my attendants are not somewhere yonder, either in the walks or in the groves; and you, M. de Guiche, remain here: I am tired, and you will perhaps give me your arm."

Had a thunderbolt fallen at the feet of the unhappy young man, he would have been less terrified than by her cold and severe tone. However, as he himself had just said, he was brave; and as in the depths of his own heart he had just decisively made up his mind, De Guiche arose, and, observing Bragelonne's hesitation, he turned towards him a glance full of resignation and grateful acknowledgement. Instead of immediately answering Madame, he even advanced a step towards the vicomte, and holding out the arm which the princess had just desired him to give her, he pressed his friend's hand in his own, with a sigh, in which he seemed to give to friendship all the life that was left in the depths of his heart. Madame, who in her pride had never known what it was to wait, now waited until this mute colloquy was at an end. Her royal hand remained suspended in the air, and, when Raoul had left, it sank without anger, but not without emotion, in that of De Guiche. They were alone in the depths of the dark and silent forest, and nothing could be heard but Raoul's hastily retreating footsteps along the obscure paths. Over their heads was extended the thick and fragrant vault of branches, through the occasional openings of which the stars could be seen glittering in their

beauty. Madame softly drew De Guiche about a hundred paces away from that indiscreet tree which had heard, and had allowed so many things to be heard, during the evening, and, leading him to a neighboring glade, so that they could see a certain distance around them, she said in a trembling voice, "I have brought you here, because yonder where you were, everything can be overheard."

"Everything can be overheard, did you say, Madame?" replied the young man, mechanically.

"Yes."

"Which means - " murmured De Guiche.

"Which means that I have heard every syllable you have said."

"Oh, Heaven! this only was wanting to destroy me," stammered De Guiche; and he bent down his head, like an exhausted swimmer beneath the wave which engulfs him.

"And so," she said, "you judge me as you have said?" De Guiche grew pale, turned his head aside, and was silent. He felt almost on the point of fainting.

"I do not complain," continued the princess, in a tone of voice full of gentleness; "I prefer a frankness that wounds me, to flattery, which

would deceive me. And so, according to your opinion, M. de Guiche, I am a coquette, an a worthless creature."

"Worthless," cried the young man; "you worthless! Oh, no; most certainly I did not say, I could not have said, that that which was the most precious object in life for me could be worthless. No, no; I did not say that."

"A woman who sees a man perish, consumed by the fire she has kindled, and who does not allay that fire, is, in my opinion, a worthless woman."

"What can it matter to you what I said?" returned the comte. "What am I compared to you, and why should you even trouble yourself to know whether I exist or not?"

"Monsieur de Guiche, both you and I are human beings, and, knowing you as

I do, I do not wish you to risk your life; with you I will change my conduct and character. I will be, not frank, for I am always so, but truthful. I implore you, therefore, to love me no more, and to forget utterly that I have ever addressed a word or a glance towards you."

De Guiche turned around, bending a look full of passionate devotion upon her. "You," he said; "_you_ excuse yourself; _you_ implore me?"

"Certainly; since I have done evil, I ought to repair the evil I have done. And so, comte, this is what we will agree to. You will forgive my frivolity and my coquetry. Nay, do not interrupt me. I will forgive you for having said I was frivolous and a coquette, or something worse, perhaps; and you will renounce your idea of dying, and will preserve for your family, for the king, and for our sex, a cavalier whom every one esteems, and whom many hold dear." Madame pronounced this last word in such an accent of frankness, and even of tenderness, that poor De Guiche's heart felt almost bursting.

"Oh! Madame, Madame!" he stammered out.

"Nay, listen further," she continued. "When you shall have renounced all thought of me forever, from necessity in the first place, and, next, because you will yield to my entreaty, then you will judge me more favorably, and I am convinced you will replace this love - forgive the frivolity of the expression - by a sincere friendship, which you will be ready to offer me, and which, I promise you, shall be cordially accepted."

De Guiche, his forehead bedewed with perspiration, a feeling of death in his heart, and a trembling agitation through his whole frame, bit his lip, stamped his foot on the ground, and, in a word, devoured the bitterness of his grief. "Madame," he said, "what you offer is impossible, and I cannot accept such conditions."

"What!" said Madame, "do you refuse my friendship, then?"

"No, no! I do not need your friendship, Madame. I prefer to die from love, than to live for friendship."

"Comte!"

"Oh! Madame," cried De Guiche, "the present is a moment for me, in which no other consideration and no other respect exist, than the consideration and respect of a man of honor towards the woman he worships. Drive me away, curse me, denounce me, you will be perfectly right. I have uttered complaints against you, but their bitterness has been owing to my passion for you; I have said I wish to die, and die I will. If I lived, you would forget me; but dead, you would never forget me, I am sure."

Henrietta, who was standing buried in thought, and nearly as agitated as De Guiche himself, turned aside her head as but a minute before he had turned aside his. Then, after a moment's pause, she said, "And you love me, then, very much?"

"Madly; madly enough to die from it, whether you drive me from you, or whether you listen to me still."

"It is a hopeless case," she said, in a playful manner; "a case which must be treated with soothing application. Give me your hand. It is as cold as ice." De Guiche knelt down, and pressed to his lips, not one, but both of Madame's hands.

"Love me, then," said the princess, "since it cannot be otherwise." And almost imperceptibly she pressed his fingers, raising him thus, partly in the manner of a queen, and partly as a fond and affectionate woman would have done. De Guiche trembled from head to foot, and Madame, who felt how passion coursed through every fiber of his being, knew that he indeed loved truly. "Give me your arm, comte," she said, "and let us return."

"Ah! Madame," said the comte, trembling and bewildered; "you have discovered a third way of killing me."

"But, happily, it is the slowest way, is it not?" she replied, as she led him towards the grove of trees they had so lately quitted.