Chapter 48

Fontainebleau at Two o'Clock in the Morning.

As we have seen, Saint-Aignan had quitted the king's apartment at the very moment the superintendent entered it. Saint-Aignan was charged with a mission that required dispatch, and he was going to do his utmost to turn his time to the best advantage. He whom we have introduced as the king's friend was indeed an uncommon personage; he was one of those valuable courtiers whose vigilance and acuteness of perception threw all other favorites into the shade, and counterbalanced, by his close attention, the servility of Dangeau, who was not the favorite, but the toady of the king. M. de Saint-Aignan began to think what was to be done in the present position of affairs. He reflected that his first information ought to come from De Guiche. He therefore set out in search of him, but De Guiche, whom we saw disappear behind one of the wings, and who seemed to have returned to his own apartments, had not entered the chateau. Saint-Aignan therefore went in quest of him, and after having turned, and twisted, and searched in every direction, he perceived something like a human form leaning against a tree. This figure was as motionless as a statue, and seemed deeply engaged in looking at a window, although its curtains were closely drawn. As this window happened to be Madame's, Saint-Aignan concluded that the form in question must be that of De Guiche. He advanced cautiously, and found he was not mistaken. De Guiche had, after his conversation with Madame, carried away such a weight of happiness, that all of his strength of mind was hardly

sufficient to enable him to support it. On his side, Saint-Aignan knew that De Guiche had had something to do with La Valliere's introduction to Madame's household, for a courtier knows everything and forgets nothing; but he had never learned under what title or conditions De Guiche had conferred his protection upon La Valliere. But, as in asking a great many questions it is singular if a man does not learn something, Saint-Aignan reckoned upon learning much or little, as the case might be, if he questioned De Guiche with that extreme tact, and, at the same time, with that persistence in attaining an object, of which he was capable. Saint-Aignan's plan was as follows: If the information obtained was satisfactory, he would inform the king, with alacrity, that he had lighted upon a pearl, and claim the privilege of setting the pearl in question in the royal crown. If the information were unsatisfactory, - which, after all, might be possible, - he would examine how far the king cared about La Valliere, and make use of his information in such a manner as to get rid of the girl altogether, and thereby obtain all the merit of her banishment with all the ladies of the court who might have the least pretensions to the king's heart, beginning with Madame and finishing with the queen. In case the king should show himself obstinate in his fancy, then he would not produce the damaging information he had obtained, but would let La Valliere know that this damaging information was carefully preserved in a secret drawer of her confidant's memory. In this manner, he would be able to air his generosity before the poor girl's eyes, and so keep her in constant suspense between gratitude and apprehension, to such an extent as to make her a friend at court, interested, as an accomplice, in trying to make his fortune, while she was making her own.

As far as concerned the day when the bombshell of the past should burst, if ever there were any occasion, Saint-Aignan promised himself that he would by that time have taken all possible precautions, and would pretend an entire ignorance of the matter to the king; while, with regard to La Valliere, he would still have an opportunity of being considered the personification of generosity. It was with such ideas as these, which the fire of covetousness had caused to dawn in half an hour, that Saint-Aignan, the son of earth, as La Fontaine would have said, determined to get De Guiche into conversation: in other words, to trouble him in his happiness - a happiness of which Saint-Aignan was quite ignorant. It was long past one o'clock in the morning when Saint-Aignan perceived De Guiche, standing, motionless, leaning against the trunk of a tree, with his eyes fastened upon the lighted window, - the sleepiest hour of night-time, which painters crown with myrtles and budding poppies, the hour when eyes are heavy, hearts throb, and heads feel dull and languid - an hour which casts upon the day which has passed away a look of regret, while addressing a loving greeting to the dawning light. For De Guiche it was the dawn of unutterable happiness; he would have bestowed a treasure upon a beggar, had one stood before him, to secure him uninterrupted indulgence in his dreams. It was precisely at this hour that Saint-Aignan, badly advised, - selfishness always counsels badly, - came and struck him on the shoulder, at the very moment he was murmuring

a word, or rather a name.

"Ah!" he cried loudly, "I was looking for you."

"For me?" said De Guiche, starting.

"Yes; and I find you seemingly moon-struck. Is it likely, my dear comte, you have been attacked by a poetical malady, and are making verses?"

The young man forced a smile upon his lips, while a thousand conflicting sensations were muttering defiance of Saint-Aignan in the deep recesses of his heart. "Perhaps," he said. "But by what happy chance - "

"Ah! your remark shows that you did not hear what I said."

"How so?"

"Why, I began by telling you I was looking for you."

"You were looking for me?"

"Yes: and I find you now in the very act."

"Of doing what, I should like to know?"

"Of singing the praises of Phyllis."

"Well, I do not deny it," said De Guiche, laughing. "Yes, my dear comte, I was celebrating Phyllis's praises."

"And you have acquired the right to do so."

"I?"

"You; no doubt of it. You; the intrepid protector of every beautiful and clever woman."

"In the name of goodness, what story have you got hold of now?"

"Acknowledged truths, I am well aware. But stay a moment; I am in love."

"You?"

"Yes."

"So much the better, my dear comte; tell me all about it." And De Guiche, afraid that Saint-Aignan might perhaps presently observe the window, where the light was still burning, took the comte's arm and endeavored to lead him away.

"Oh!" said the latter, resisting, "do not take me towards those dark woods, it is too damp there. Let us stay in the moonlight." And while he yielded to the pressure of De Guiche's arm, he remained in the flower-garden adjoining the chateau.

"Well," said De Guiche, resigning himself, "lead me where you like, and ask me what you please."

"It is impossible to be more agreeable than you are." And then, after a moment's silence, Saint-Aignan continued, "I wish you to tell me something about a certain person in who you have interested yourself."

"And with whom you are in love?"

"I will neither admit nor deny it. You understand that a man does not very readily place his heart where there is no hope of return, and that it is most essential he should take measures of security in advance."

"You are right," said De Guiche with a sigh; "a man's heart is a very precious gift."

"Mine particularly is very tender, and in that light I present it to you."

"Oh! you are well known, comte. Well?"

"It is simply a question of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Why, my dear Saint-Aignan, you are losing your senses, I should think."

"Why so?"

"I have never shown or taken any interest in Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Bah!"

"Never."

"Did you not obtain admission for Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente into Madame's household?"

"Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente - and you ought to know it better than any one else, my dear comte - is of a sufficiently good family to make her presence here desirable, and her admittance very easy."

"You are jesting."

"No; and upon my honor I do not know what you mean."

"And you had nothing, then, to do with her admission?"

"No."

"You do not know her?"

"I saw her for the first time the day she was presented to Madame. Therefore, as I have never taken any interest in her, as I do not know

her, I am not able to give you the information you require." And De Guiche made a movement as though he were about to leave his questioner.

"Nay, nay, one moment, my dear comte," said Saint-Aignan; "you shall not escape me in this manner."

"Why, really, it seems to me that it is now time to return to our apartments."

"And yet you were not going in when I - did not meet, but found you."

"Therefore, my dear comte," said De Guiche, "as long as you have anything to say to me, I place myself entirely at your service."

"And you are quite right in doing so. What matters half an hour more or less? Will you swear that you have no injurious communications to make to me about her, and that any injurious communications you might possibly have to make are not the cause of your silence?"

"Oh! I believe the poor child to be as pure as crystal."

"You overwhelm me with joy. And yet I do not wish to have towards you the appearance of a man so badly informed as I seem. It is quite certain that you supplied the princess's household with the ladies of honor. Nay, a song has even been written about it."

"Oh! songs are written about everything."

"Do you know it?"

"No: sing it to me and I shall make its acquaintance."

"I cannot tell you how it begins; I only remember how it ends."

"Very well, at all events, that is something."

"When Maids of Honor happen to run short,
Lo! - Guiche will furnish the entire Court."

"The idea is weak, and the rhyme poor," said De Guiche.

"What can you expect, my dear fellow? it is not Racine's or Moliere's,
but La Feuillade's; and a great lord cannot rhyme like a beggarly poet."

"It is very unfortunate, though, that you only remember the termination."

"Stay, stay, I have just recollected the beginning of the second couplet."

"Why, there's the birdcage, with a pretty pair,
The charming Montalais, and..."

"And La Valliere," exclaimed Guiche, impatiently, and completely ignorant

besides of Saint-Aignan's object.

"Yes, yes, you have it. You have hit upon the word, 'La Valliere.'"

"A grand discovery indeed."

"Montalais and La Valliere, these, then, are the two young girls in whom you interest yourself," said Saint-Aignan, laughing.

"And so Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's name is not to be met with in the song?"

"No, indeed."

"And are you satisfied, then?"

"Perfectly; but I find Montalais there," said Saint-Aignan, still laughing.

"Oh! you will find her everywhere. She is a singularly active young lady."

"You know her?"

"Indirectly. She was the _protegee_ of a man named Malicorne, who is a _protegee_ of Manicamp's; Manicamp asked me to get the situation of maid

of honor for Montalais in Madame's household, and a situation for Malicorne as an officer in Monsieur's household. Well, I asked for the appointments, for you know very well that I have a weakness for that droll fellow Manicamp."

"And you obtained what you sought?"

"For Montalais, yes; for Malicorne, yes and no; for as yet he is only on trial. Do you wish to know anything else?"

"The last word of the couplet still remains, La Valliere," said Saint-Aignan, resuming the smile that so tormented Guiche.

"Well," said the latter, "it is true that I obtained admission for her in Madame's household."

"Ah!" said Saint-Aignan.

"But," continued Guiche, assuming a great coldness of manner, "you will oblige me, comte, not to jest about that name. Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc de la Valliere is a young lady perfectly well-conducted."

"Perfectly well-conducted do you say?"

"Yes."

"Then you have not heard the last rumor?" exclaimed Saint-Aignan.

"No, and you will do me a service, my dear comte, in keeping this report to yourself and to those who circulate it."

"Ah! bah! you take the matter up very seriously."

"Yes; Mademoiselle de Valliere is beloved by one of my best friends."

Saint-Aignan started. "Aha!" he said.

"Yes, comte," continued Guiche; "and consequently, you, the most distinguished man in France for polished courtesy of manner, will understand that I cannot allow my friend to be placed in a ridiculous position."

Saint-Aignan began to bite his nails, partially from vexation, and partially from disappointed curiosity. Guiche made him a very profound bow.

"You send me away," said Saint-Aignan, who was dying to know the name of the friend.

"I do not send you away, my dear fellow. I am going to finish my lines to Phyllis."

"And those lines - "

"Are a _quatrain_. You understand, I trust, that a _quatrain_ is a serious affair?"

"Of course."

"And as, of these four lines, of which it is composed, I have yet three and a half to make, I need my undivided attention."

"I quite understand. Adieu! comte. By the by - "

"What?"

"Are you quick at making verses?"

"Wonderfully so."

"Will you have quite finished the three lines and a half to-morrow morning?"

"I _hope_ so."

"Adieu, then, until to-morrow."

"Adieu, adieu!"

Saint-Aignan was obliged to accept the notice to quit; he accordingly did so, and disappeared behind the hedge. Their conversation had led Guiche and Saint-Aignan a good distance from the chateau.

Every mathematician, every poet, and every dreamer has his own subjects of interest. Saint-Aignan, on leaving Guiche, found himself at the extremity of the grove, - at the very spot where the outbuildings of the servants begin, and where, behind the thickets of acacias and chestnut-trees interlacing their branches, which were hidden by masses of clematis and young vines, the wall which separated the woods from the courtyard was erected. Saint-Aignan, alone, took the path which led towards these buildings; De Guiche going off in the opposite direction. The one proceeded to the flower-garden, while the other bent his steps towards the walls. Saint-Aignan walked on between rows of mountain-ash, lilac, and hawthorn, which formed an almost impenetrable roof above his head; his feet were buried in the soft gravel and thick moss. He was deliberating a means of taking his revenge, which seemed difficult for him to carry out, and was vexed with himself for not having learned more about La Valliere, notwithstanding the ingenious measures he had resorted to in order to acquire more information about her, when suddenly the murmur of a human voice attracted his attention. He heard whispers, the complaining tones of a woman's voice mingled with entreaties, smothered laughter, sighs, and half-stilted exclamations of surprise; but above them all, the woman's voice prevailed. Saint-Aignan stopped to look about him; he perceived from the greatest surprise that the voices

proceeded, not from the ground, but from the branches of the trees. As he glided along under the covered walk, he raised his head, and observed at the top of the wall a woman perched upon a ladder, in eager conversation with a man seated on a branch of a chestnut-tree, whose head alone could be seen, the rest of his body being concealed in the thick covert of the chestnut.