

Chapter 50

How Malicorne Had Been Turned Out of the Hotel of the Beau Paon.

While Montalais was engaged in looking after the comte and Manicamp, Malicorne had taken advantage of the young girl's attention being drawn away to render his position somewhat more tolerable, and when she turned round, she immediately noticed the change which had taken place; for he had seated himself, like a monkey, upon the wall, the foliage of the wild vine and honeysuckle curled around his head like a faun, while the twisted ivy branches represented tolerably enough his cloven feet. Montalais required nothing to make her resemblance to a dryad as complete as possible. "Well," she said, ascending another round of the ladder, "are you resolved to render me unhappy? have you not persecuted me enough, tyrant that you are?"

"I a tyrant?" said Malicorne.

"Yes, you are always compromising me, Monsieur Malicorne; you are a perfect monster of wickedness."

"I?"

"What have you to do with Fontainebleau? Is not Orleans your place of residence?"

"Do you ask me what I have to do here? I wanted to see you."

"Ah, great need of that."

"Not as far as concerns yourself, perhaps, but as far as I am concerned, Mademoiselle Montalais, you know very well that I have left my home, and that, for the future, I have no other place of residence than that which you may happen to have. As you, therefore, are staying at Fontainebleau at the present moment, I have come to Fontainebleau."

Montalais shrugged her shoulders. "You wished to see me, did you not?" she said.

"Of course."

"Very well, you have seen me, - you are satisfied; so now go away."

"Oh, no," said Malicorne; "I came to talk with you as well as to see you."

"Very well, we will talk by and by, and in another place than this."

"By and by! Heaven only knows if I shall meet you by and by in another place. We shall never find a more favorable one than this."

"But I cannot this evening, nor at the present moment."

"Why not?"

"Because a thousand things have happened to-night."

"Well, then, my affair will make a thousand and one."

"No, no; Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente is waiting for me in our room to communicate something of the very greatest importance."

"How long has she been waiting?"

"For an hour at least."

"In that case," said Malicorne, tranquilly, "she can wait a few minutes longer."

"Monsieur Malicorne," said Montalais, "you are forgetting yourself."

"You should rather say that it is you who are forgetting me, and that I am getting impatient at the part you make me play here indeed! For the last week I have been prowling about among the company, and you have not once deigned to notice my presence."

"Have you been prowling about here for a week, M. Malicorne?"

"Like a wolf; sometimes I have been burnt by the fireworks, which have singed two of my wigs; at others, I have been completely drenched in the

osiers by the evening damps, or the spray from the fountains, - half-famished, fatigued to death, with the view of a wall always before me, and the prospect of having to scale it perhaps. Upon my word, this is not the sort of life for any one to lead who is neither a squirrel, a salamander, nor an otter; and since you drive your inhumanity so far as to wish to make me renounce my condition as a man, I declare it openly. A man I am, indeed, and a man I will remain, unless by superior orders."

"Well, then, tell me, what do you wish, - what do you require, - what do you insist upon?" said Montalais, in a submissive tone.

"Do you mean to tell me that you did not know I was at Fontainebleau?"

"I?"

"Nay, be frank."

"I suspected so."

"Well, then, could you not have contrived during the last week to have seen me once a day, at least?"

"I have always been prevented, M. Malicorne."

"Fiddlesticks!"

"Ask my companion, if you do not believe me."

"I shall ask no one to explain matters, I know better than any one."

"Compose yourself, M. Malicorne: things will change."

"They must indeed."

"You know that, whether I see you or not, I am thinking of you," said Montalais, in a coaxing tone of voice.

"Oh, you are thinking of me, are you? well, and is there anything new?"

"What about?"

"About my post in Monsieur's household."

"Ah, my dear Malicorne, no one has ventured lately to approach his royal highness."

"Well, but now?"

"Now it is quite a different thing; since yesterday he has left off being jealous."

"Bah! how has his jealousy subsided?"

"It has been diverted into another channel."

"Tell me all about it."

"A report was spread that the king had fallen in love with some one else, and Monsieur was tranquillized immediately."

"And who spread the report?"

Montalais lowered her voice. "Between ourselves," she said, "I think that Madame and the king have come to a secret understanding about it."

"Ah!" said Malicorne; "that was the only way to manage it. But what about poor M. de Guiche?"

"Oh, as for him, he is completely turned off."

"Have they been writing to each other?"

"No, certainly not; I have not seen a pen in either of their hands for the last week."

"On what terms are you with Madame?"

"The very best."

"And with the king?"

"The king always smiles at me whenever I pass him."

"Good. Now tell me whom have the two lovers selected to serve as their screen?"

"La Valliere."

"Oh, oh, poor girl! We must prevent that!"

"Why?"

"Because, if M. Raoul Bragelonne were to suspect it, he would either kill her or kill himself."

"Raoul, poor fellow! do you think so?"

"Women pretend to have a knowledge of the state of people's affections," said Malicorne, "and they do not even know how to read the thoughts of their own minds and hearts. Well, I can tell you that M. de Bragelonne loves La Valliere to such a degree that, if she deceived him, he would, I repeat, either kill himself or kill her."

"But the king is there to defend her," said Montalais.

"The king!" exclaimed Malicorne; "Raoul would kill the king as he would a common thief."

"Good heavens!" said Montalais; "you are mad, M. Malicorne."

"Not in the least. Everything I have told you is, on the contrary, perfectly serious; and, for my own part, I know one thing."

"What is that?"

"That I shall quietly tell Raoul of the trick."

"Hush!" said Montalais, mounting another round of the ladder, so as to approach Malicorne more closely, "do not open your lips to poor Raoul."

"Why not?"

"Because, as yet you know nothing at all."

"What is the matter, then?"

"Why, this evening - but no one is listening, I hope?"

"No."

"This evening, then, beneath the royal oak, La Valliere said aloud, and innocently enough, 'I cannot conceive that when one has once seen the king, one can ever love another man.'"

Malicorne almost jumped off the wall. "Unhappy girl! did she really say that?"

"Word for word."

"And she thinks so?"

"La Valliere always thinks what she says."

"That positively cries aloud for vengeance. Why, women are the veriest serpents," said Malicorne.

"Compose yourself, my dear Malicorne, compose yourself."

"No, no; let us take the evil in time, on the contrary. There is time enough yet to tell Raoul of it."

"Blunderer, on the contrary, it is too late," replied Montalais.

"How so?"

"La Valliere's remark, which was intended for the king, reached its

destination."

"The king knows it, then? The king was told of it, I suppose?"

"The king heard it."

"_Ahime!_ as the cardinal used to say."

"The king was hidden in the thicket close to the royal oak."

"It follows, then," said Malicorne, "that for the future, the plan which the king and Madame have arranged, will go as easily as if it were on wheels, and will pass over poor Bragelonne's body."

"Precisely so."

"Well," said Malicorne, after a moment's reflection, "do not let us interpose our poor selves between a large oak-tree and a great king, for we should certainly be ground to pieces."

"The very thing I was going to say to you."

"Let us think of ourselves, then."

"My own idea."

"Open your beautiful eyes, then."

"And you your large ears."

"Approach your little mouth for a kiss."

"Here," said Montalais, who paid the debt immediately in ringing coin.

"Now let us consider. First, we have M. de Guiche, who is in love with Madame; then La Valliere, who is in love with the king; next, the king, who is in love both with Madame and La Valliere; lastly Monsieur, who loves no one but himself. Among all these loves, a noodle would make his fortune: a greater reason, therefore, for sensible people like ourselves to do so."

"There you are with your dreams again."

"Nay, rather with realities. Let me still lead you, darling. I do not think you have been very badly off hitherto?"

"No."

"Well, the future is guaranteed by the past. Only, since all here think of themselves before anything else, let us do so too."

"Perfectly right."

"But of ourselves only."

"Be it so."

"An offensive and defensive alliance."

"I am ready to swear it."

"Put out your hand, then, and say, 'All for Malicorne.'"

"All for Malicorne."

"And I, 'All for Montalais,'" replied Malicorne, stretching out his hand in his turn.

"And now, what is to be done?"

"Keep your eyes and ears constantly open; collect every means of attack which may be serviceable against others; never let anything lie about which can be used against ourselves."

"Agreed."

"Decided."

"Sworn to. And now the agreement entered into, good-bye."

"What do you mean by 'good-bye?'"

"Of course you can now return to your inn."

"To my inn?"

"Yes; are you not lodging at the sign of the Beau Paon?"

"Montalais, Montalais, you now betray that you were aware of my being at Fontainebleau."

"Well; and what does that prove, except that I occupy myself about you more than you deserve?"

"Hum!"

"Go back, then, to the Beau Paon."

"That is now quite out of the question."

"Have you not a room there?"

"I had, but have it no longer."

"Who has taken it from you, then?"

"I will tell you. Some little time ago I was returning there, after I had been running about after you; and having reached my hotel quite out of breath, I perceived a litter, upon which four peasants were carrying a sick monk."

"A monk?"

"Yes, an old gray-bearded Franciscan. As I was looking at the monk, they entered the hotel; and as they were carrying him up the staircase, I followed, and as I reached the top of the staircase I observed that they took him into my room."

"Into your room?"

"Yes, into my own apartment. Supposing it to be a mistake, I summoned the landlord, who said that the room which had been let to me for the past eight days was let to the Franciscan for the ninth."

"Oh, oh!"

"That was exactly what I said; nay, I did even more, for I was inclined to get out of temper. I went up-stairs again. I spoke to the Franciscan himself, and wished to prove to him the impropriety of the step; when this monk, dying though he seemed to be, raised himself upon his arm,

fixed a pair of blazing eyes upon me, and, in a voice which was admirably suited for commanding a charge of cavalry, said, 'Turn this fellow out of doors;' which was done, immediately by the landlord and the four porters, who made me descend the staircase somewhat faster than was agreeable. This is how it happens, dearest, that I have no lodging."

"Who can this Franciscan be?" said Montalais. "Is he a general?"

"That is exactly the very title that one of the bearers of the litter gave him as he spoke to him in a low tone."

"So that - " said Montalais.

"So that I have no room, no hotel, no lodging; and I am as determined as my friend Manicamp was just now, not to pass the night in the open air."

"What is to be done, then?" said Montalais.

"Nothing easier," said a third voice; whereupon Montalais and Malicorne uttered a simultaneous cry, and Saint-Aignan appeared. "Dear Monsieur Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, "a very lucky accident has brought me back to extricate you from your embarrassment. Come, I can offer you a room in my own apartments, which, I can assure you, no Franciscan will deprive you of. As for you, my dear lady, rest easy. I already knew Mademoiselle de la Valliere's secret, and that of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; your own you have just been kind enough to confide to me; for

which I thank you. I can keep three quite as well as one." Malicorne and Montalais looked at each other, like children detected in a theft; but as Malicorne saw a great advantage in the proposition which had been made to him, he gave Montalais a sign of assent, which she returned. Malicorne then descended the ladder, round by round, reflecting at every step on the means of obtaining piecemeal from M. de Saint-Aignan all he might possibly know about the famous secret. Montalais had already darted away like a deer, and neither cross-road nor labyrinth was able to lead her wrong. As for Saint-Aignan, he carried off Malicorne with him to his apartments, showing him a thousand attentions, enchanted to have so close at hand the very two men who, even supposing De Guiche were to remain silent, could give him the best information about the maids of honor.