

Chapter 54

A Mission.

The next day, or rather the same day (for the events we have just described were concluded only at three o'clock in the morning), before breakfast was served, and as the king was preparing to go to mass with the two queens; as Monsieur, with the Chevalier de Lorraine, and a few other intimate companions, was mounting his horse to set off for the river, to take one of those celebrated baths with which the ladies of the court were so infatuated, as, in fact, no one remained in the chateau, with the exception of Madame who, under the pretext of indisposition, would not leave her room; Montalais was seen, or rather not was not seen, to glide stealthily out of the room appropriated to the maids of honor, leading La Valliere after her, who tried to conceal herself as much as possible, and both of them, hurrying secretly through the gardens, succeeded, looking round them at every step they took, in reaching the thicket. The weather was cloudy, a warm breeze bowed the flowers and the shrubs, the burning dust, swept along in clouds by the wind, was whirled in eddies towards the trees. Montalais, who, during their progress, had discharged the functions of a clever scout, advanced a few steps further, and turning round again, to be quite sure that no one was either listening or approaching, said to her companion, "Thank goodness, we are quite alone! Since yesterday every one spies on us here, and a circle seems to be drawn round us, as if we were plague-stricken." La Valliere bent down her head and sighed. "It is positively unheard of," continued Montalais; "from M. Malicorne to M. de Saint-Aignan, every one wishes to

get hold of our secret. Come, Louise, let us take counsel, you and I, together, in order that I may know what to do."

La Valliere lifted towards her companion her beautiful eyes, pure and deep as the azure of a spring sky, "And I," she said, "will ask you why we have been summoned to Madame's own room? Why have we slept close to her apartment, instead of sleeping as usual in our own? Why did you return so late, and whence are these measures of strict supervision which have been adopted since this morning, with respect to us both?"

"My dear Louise, you answer my question by another, or rather, by ten others, which is not answering me at all. I will tell you all you want to know later, and as it is of secondary importance, you can wait. What I ask you - for everything will depend upon that - is, whether there is or is not any secret?"

"I do not know if there is any secret," said La Valliere; "but I do know, for my part at least, that there has been great imprudence committed. Since the foolish remark I made, and my still more silly fainting yesterday, every one here is making remarks about us."

"Speak for yourself," said Montalais, laughing, "speak for yourself and for Tonnay-Charente; for both of you made your declarations of love to the skies, which unfortunately were intercepted."

La Valliere hung down her head. "Really you overwhelm me," she said.

"I?"

"Yes, you torture me with your jests."

"Listen to me, Louise. These are no jests, for nothing is more serious; on the contrary, I did not drag you out of the chateau; I did not miss attending mass; I did not pretend to have a cold, as Madame did, which she has no more than I have; and, lastly, I did not display ten times more diplomacy than M. Colbert inherited from M. de Mazarin, and makes use of with respect to M. Fouquet, in order to find means of confiding my perplexities to you, for the sole end and purpose that, when at last we were alone, with no one to listen to us, you should deal hypocritically with me. No, no; believe me, that when I ask you a question, it is not from curiosity alone, but really because the position is a critical one. What you said yesterday is now known, - it is a text on which every one is discoursing. Every one embellishes it to the utmost, and according to his own fancy; you had the honor last night, and you have it still to-day, of occupying the whole court, my dear Louise; and the number of tender and witty remarks which have been ascribed to you, would make Mademoiselle de Scudery and her brother burst from very spite, if they were faithfully reported."

"But, dearest Montalais," said the poor girl, "you know better than any one exactly what I said, since you were present when I said it."

"Yes, I know. But that is not the question. I have not forgotten a single syllable you uttered, but did you think what you were saying?"

Louise became confused. "What," she exclaimed, "more questions still! Oh, heavens! when I would give the world to forget what I did say, how does it happen that every one does all he possibly can to remind me of it? Oh, this is indeed terrible!"

"What is?"

"To have a friend who ought to spare me, who might advise me and help me to save myself, and yet who is undoing me - is killing me."

"There, there, that will do," said Montalais; "after having said too little, you now say too much. No one thinks of killing you, nor even of robbing you, even of your secret; I wish to have it voluntarily, and in no other way; for the question does not concern your own affairs only, but ours also; and Tonnay-Charente would tell you as I do, if she were here. For, the fact is, that last evening she wished to have some private conversation in our room, and I was going there after the Manicamp and Malicorne colloquies terminated, when I learned, on my return, rather late, it is true, that Madame had sequestered her maids of honor, and that we were to sleep in her apartments, instead of our own. Moreover, Madame has shut up her maids of honor in order that they should

not have the time to concert any measures together, and this morning she was closeted with Tonnay-Charente with the same object. Tell me, then, to what extent Athenais and I can rely upon you, as we will tell you in what way you can rely upon us?"

"I do not clearly understand the question you have put," said Louise, much agitated.

"Hum! and yet, on the contrary, you seem to understand me very well. However, I will put my questions in a more precise manner, in order that you may not be able, in the slightest degree, to evade them. Listen to me: _Do you love M. de Bragelonne?_ That is plain enough, is it not?"

At this question, which fell like the first bombshell of a besieging army into a doomed town, Louise started. "You ask me," she exclaimed, "if I love Raoul, the friend of my childhood, - my brother almost?"

"No, no, no! Again you evade me, or rather, you wish to escape me. I do not ask if you love Raoul, your childhood's friend, - your brother; but I ask if you love the Vicomte de Bragelonne, your affianced husband?"

"Good heavens! dear Montalais," said Louise, "how severe your tone is!"

"You deserve no indulgence, - I am neither more nor less severe than usual. I put a question to you, so answer it."

"You certainly do not," said Louise, in a choking voice, "speak to me like a friend; but I will answer you as a true friend."

"Well, do so."

"Very well; my heart is full of scruples and silly feelings of pride, with respect to everything that a woman ought to keep secret, and in this respect no one has ever read into the bottom of my soul."

"That I know very well. If I had read it, I should not interrogate you as I have done; I should simply say, - 'My good Louise, you have the happiness of an acquaintance with M. de Bragelonne, who is an excellent young man, and an advantageous match for a girl without fortune. M. de la Fere will leave something like fifteen thousand livres a year to his son. At a future day, then, you, as this son's wife, will have fifteen thousand livres a year; which is not bad. Turn, then, neither to the right hand nor to the left, but go frankly to M. de Bragelonne; that is to say, to the altar to which he will lead you. Afterwards, why - afterwards, according to his disposition, you will be emancipated or enslaved; in other words, you will have a right to commit any piece of folly people commit who have either too much liberty or too little.' That is, my dear Louise, what I should have told you at first, if I had been able to read your heart."

"And I should have thanked you," stammered out Louise, "although the advice does not appear to me to be altogether sound."

"Wait, wait. But immediately after having given you that advice, I should have added, - 'Louise, it is very dangerous to pass whole days with your head drooping, your hands unoccupied, your eyes restless and full of thought; it is dangerous to prefer the least frequented paths, and no longer be amused with such diversions as gladden young girls' hearts; it is dangerous, Louise, to scrawl with the point of your foot, as you do, upon the gravel, certain letters it is useless for you to efface, but which appear again under your heel, particularly when those letters rather resemble the letter L than the letter B; and, lastly, it is dangerous to allow the mind to dwell on a thousand wild fancies, the fruits of solitude and heartache; these fancies, while they sink into a young girl's mind, make her cheeks sink in also, so that it is not unusual, on such occasions, to find the most delightful persons in the world become the most disagreeable, and the wittiest to become the dullest.'"

"I thank you, dearest Aure," replied La Valliere, gently; "it is like you to speak to me in this manner, and I thank you for it."

"It was only for the benefit of wild dreamers, such as I have just described, that I spoke; do not take any of my words, then, to yourself, except such as you think you deserve. Stay, I hardly know what story recurs to my memory of some silly or melancholy girl, who was gradually pining away because she fancied that the prince, or the king, or the emperor, whoever it was - and it does not matter much which - had fallen

in love with her; while on the contrary, the prince, or the king, or the emperor, whichever you please, was plainly in love with some one else, and - a singular circumstance, one, indeed, which she could not perceive, although every one around and about her perceived it clearly enough - made use of her as a screen for his own love affair. You laugh as I do, at this poor silly girl, do you not, Louise?"

"I? - oh! of course," stammered Louise, pale as death.

"And you are right, too, for the thing is amusing enough. The story, whether true or false, amused me, and so I remembered it and told it to you. Just imagine then, my good Louise, the mischief that such a melancholy would create in anybody's brain, - a melancholy, I mean, of that kind. For my own part, I resolved to tell you the story; for if such a thing were to happen to either of us, it would be most essential to be assured of its truth; to-day it is a snare, to-morrow it would become a jest and mockery, the next day it would mean death itself." La Valliere started again, and became, if possible, still paler.

"Whenever a king takes notice of us," continued Montalais, "he lets us see it easily enough, and, if we happen to be the object he covets, he knows very well how to gain his object. You see, then, Louise, that, in such circumstances, between young girls exposed to such a danger as the one in question, the most perfect confidence should exist, in order that those hearts which are not disposed towards melancholy may watch over those likely to become so."

"Silence, silence!" said La Valliere; "some one approaches."

"Some one is approaching fast, in fact," said Montalais; "but who can it possibly be? Everybody is away, either at mass with the king, or bathing with Monsieur."

At the end of the walk the young girls perceived almost immediately, beneath the arching trees, the graceful carriage and noble stature of a young man, who, with his sword under his arm and a cloak thrown across his shoulders, booted and spurred besides, saluted them from the distance with a gentle smile. "Raoul!" exclaimed Montalais.

"M. de Bragelonne!" murmured Louise.

"A very proper judge to decide upon our difference of opinion," said Montalais.

"Oh! Montalais, Montalais, for pity's sake," exclaimed La Valliere, "after having been so cruel, show me a little mercy." These words, uttered with all the fervor of a prayer, effaced all trace of irony, if not from Montalais's heart, at least from her face.

"Why, you are as handsome as Amadis, Monsieur de Bragelonne," she cried to Raoul, "and armed and booted like him."

"A thousand compliments, young ladies," replied Raoul, bowing.

"But why, I ask, are you booted in this manner?" repeated Montalais, whilst La Valliere, although she looked at Raoul with a surprise equal to that of her companion, nevertheless uttered not a word.

"Why?" inquired Raoul.

"Yes!" ventured Louise.

"Because I am about to set off," said Bragelonne, looking at Louise.

The young girl seemed as though smitten by some superstitious feeling of terror, and tottered. "You are going away, Raoul!" she cried; "and where are you going?"

"Dearest Louise," he replied, with that quiet, composed manner which was natural to him, "I am going to England."

"What are you going to do in England?"

"The king has sent me there."

"The king!" exclaimed Louise and Aure together, involuntarily exchanging glances, the conversation which had just been interrupted recurring to them both. Raoul intercepted the glance, but could not understand its

meaning, and, naturally enough, attributed it to the interest both the young girls took in him.

"His majesty," he said, "has been good enough to remember that the Comte de la Fere is high in favor with King Charles II. This morning, as he was on his way to attend mass, the king, seeing me as he passed, signed to me to approach, which I accordingly did. 'Monsieur de Bragelonne,' he said to me, 'you will call upon M. Fouquet, who has received from me letters for the king of Great Britain; you will be the bearer of them.' I bowed. 'Ah!' his majesty added, 'before you leave, you will be good enough to take any commissions which Madame may have for the king her brother.'"

"Gracious heaven!" murmured Louise, much agitated, and yet full of thought at the same time.

"So quickly! You are desired to set off in such haste!" said Montalais, almost paralyzed by this unforeseen event.

"Properly to obey those whom we respect," said Raoul, "it is necessary to obey quickly. Within ten minutes after I had received the order, I was ready. Madame, already informed, is writing the letter which she is good enough to do me the honor of intrusting to me. In the meantime, learning from Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente that it was likely you would be in this direction, I came here, and am happy to find you both."

"And both of us very sad, as you see," said Montalais, going to Louise's assistance, whose countenance was visibly altered.

"Suffering?" responded Raoul, pressing Louise's hand with a tender curiosity. "Your hand is like ice."

"It is nothing."

"This coldness does not reach your heart, Louise, does it?" inquired the young man, with a tender smile. Louise raised her head hastily, as if the question had been inspired by some suspicion, and had aroused a feeling of remorse.

"Oh! you know," she said, with an effort, "that my heart will never be cold towards a friend like yourself, Monsieur de Bragelonne."

"Thank you, Louise. I know both your heart and your mind; it is not by the touch of the hand that one can judge of an affection like yours. You know, Louise, how devotedly I love you, with what perfect and unreserved confidence I reserve my life for you; will you not forgive me, then, for speaking to you with something like the frankness of a child?"

"Speak, Monsieur Raoul," said Louise, trembling painfully, "I am listening."

"I cannot part from you, carrying away with me a thought that tortures

me; absurd I know it to be, and yet one which rends my very heart."

"Are you going away, then, for any length of time?" inquired La Valliere, with faltering utterance, while Montalais turned her head aside.

"No; probably I shall not be absent more than a fortnight." La Valliere pressed her hand upon her heart, which felt as though it were breaking.

"It is strange," pursued Raoul, looking at the young girl with a melancholy expression; "I have often left you when setting off on adventures fraught with danger. Then I started joyously enough - my heart free, my mind intoxicated by thoughts of happiness in store for me, hopes of which the future was full; and yet I was about to face the Spanish cannon, or the halberds of the Walloons. To-day, without the existence of any danger or uneasiness, and by the sunniest path in the world, I am going in search of a glorious recompense, which this mark of the king's favor seems to indicate, for I am, perhaps, going to win you, Louise. What other favor, more precious than yourself, could the king confer upon me? Yet, Louise, in very truth I know not how or why, but this happiness and this future seem to vanish before my very eyes like mist - like an idle dream; and I feel here, here at the very bottom of my heart, a deep-seated grief, a dejection I cannot overcome - something heavy, passionless, death-like, - resembling a corpse. Oh! Louise, too well do I know why; it is because I have never loved you so truly as now. God help me!"

At this last exclamation, which issued as it were from a broken heart, Louise burst into tears, and threw herself into Montalais's arms. The latter, although she was not easily moved, felt the tears rush to her eyes. Raoul noted only the tears Louise shed; his look, however, did not penetrate - nay, sought not to penetrate - beyond those tears. He bent his knee before her, and tenderly kissed her hand; and it was evident that in that kiss he poured out his whole heart.

"Rise, rise," said Montalais to him, ready to cry, "for Athenais is coming."

Raoul rose, brushed his knee with the back of his hand, smiled again upon Louise, whose eyes were fixed on the ground, and, having pressed Montalais's hand gratefully, he turned round to salute Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, the sound of whose silken robe was already heard upon the gravel walk. "Has Madame finished her letter?" he inquired, when the young girl came within reach of his voice.

"Yes, the letter is finished, sealed, and her royal highness is ready to receive you."

Raoul, at this remark, hardly gave himself time to salute Athenais, cast one look at Louise, bowed to Montalais, and withdrew in the direction of the chateau. As he withdrew he again turned round, but at last, at the end of the grand walk, it was useless to do so again, as he could no longer see them. The three young girls, on their side, had, with widely

different feelings, watched him disappear.

"At last," said Athenais, the first to interrupt the silence, "at last we are alone, free to talk of yesterday's great affair, and to come to an understanding upon the conduct it is advisable for us to pursue. Besides, if you will listen to me," she continued, looking round on all sides, "I will explain to you, as briefly as possible, in the first place, our own duty, such as I imagine it to be, and, if you do not understand a hint, what is Madame's desire on the subject." And Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente pronounced these words in such a tone as to leave no doubt, in her companion's minds, upon the official character with which she was invested.

"Madame's desire!" exclaimed Montalais and La Valliere together.

"Her ultimatum," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, diplomatically.

"But," murmured La Valliere, "does Madame know, then - "

"Madame knows more about the matter than we said, even," said Athenais, in a formal, precise manner. "Therefore let us come to a proper understanding."

"Yes, indeed," said Montalais, "and I am listening in breathless

attention."

"Gracious heavens!" murmured Louise, trembling, "shall I ever survive this cruel evening?"

"Oh! do not frighten yourself in that manner," said Athenais; "we have found a remedy." So, seating herself between her two companions, and taking each of them by the hand, which she held in her own, she began. The first words were hardly spoke, when they heard a horse galloping away over the stones of the public high-road, outside the gates of the chateau.