

Chapter 59

Something That neither Naiad nor Dryad Foresaw.

Saint-Aignan stopped at the foot of the staircase leading to the _entresol_, where the maids of honor were lodged, and to the first floor, where Madame's apartments were situated. Then, by means of one of the servants who was passing, he sent to apprise Malicorne, who was still with Monsieur. After having waited ten minutes, Malicorne arrived, full of self-importance. The king drew back towards the darkest part of the vestibule. Saint-Aignan, on the contrary, advanced to meet him, but at the first words, indicating his wish, Malicorne drew back abruptly.

"Oh, oh!" he said, "you want me to introduce you into the rooms of the maids of honor?"

"Yes."

"You know very well that I cannot do anything of the kind, without being made acquainted with your object."

"Unfortunately, my dear Monsieur Malicorne, it is quite impossible for me to give you any explanation; you must therefore confide in me as in a friend who got you out of a great difficulty yesterday, and who now begs you to draw him out of one to-day."

"Yet I told you, monsieur, what my object was; which was, not to sleep

out in the open air, and any man might express the same wish, whilst you, however, admit nothing."

"Believe me, my dear Monsieur Malicorne," Saint-Aignan persisted, "that if I were permitted to explain myself, I would do so."

"In that case, my dear monsieur, it is impossible for me to allow you to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais's apartment."

"Why so?"

"You know why, better than any one else, since you caught me on the wall paying my addresses to Mademoiselle de Montalais; it would, therefore, be an excess of kindness on my part, you will admit, since I am paying my attentions to her, to open the door of her room to you."

"But who told you it was on her account I asked you for the key?"

"For whom, then?"

"She does not lodge there alone, I suppose?"

"No, certainly; for Mademoiselle de la Valliere shares her rooms with her; but, really, you have nothing more to do with Mademoiselle de la Valliere than with Mademoiselle de Montalais, and there are only two men to whom I would give this key; to M. de Bragelonne, if he begged me to

give it to him, and to the king, if he commanded me."

"In that case, give me the key, monsieur: I order you to do so," said the king, advancing from the obscurity, and partially opening his cloak.

"Mademoiselle de Montalais will step down to talk with you, while we go up-stairs to Mademoiselle de la Valliere, for, in fact, it is she only whom we desire to see."

"The king!" exclaimed Malicorne, bowing to the very ground.

"Yes, the king," said Louis, smiling: "the king, who is as pleased with your resistance as with your capitulation. Rise, monsieur, and render us the service we request of you."

"I obey, your majesty," said Malicorne, leading the way up the staircase.

"Get Mademoiselle de Montalais to come down," said the king, "and do not breathe a word to her of my visit."

Malicorne bowed in token of obedience, and proceeded up the staircase. But the king, after a hasty reflection, followed him, and that, too, with such rapidity, that, although Malicorne was already more than half-way up the staircase, the king reached the room at the same moment. He then observed, by the door which remained half-opened behind Malicorne, La Valliere, sitting in an armchair with her head thrown back, and in the opposite corner Montalais, who, in her dressing-gown, was standing before

a looking-glass, engaged in arranging her hair, and parleying the while with Malicorne. The king hurriedly opened the door and entered the room. Montalais called out at the noise made by the opening of the door, and, recognizing the king, made her escape. La Valliere rose from her seat, like a dead person galvanized, and then fell back in her armchair. The king advanced slowly towards her.

"You wished for an audience, I believe," he said coldly. "I am ready to hear you. Speak."

Saint-Aignan, faithful to his character of being deaf, blind, and dumb, had stationed himself in a corner of the door, upon a stool which by chance he found there. Concealed by the tapestry which covered the doorway, and leaning his back against the wall, he could thus listen without being seen; resigning himself to the post of a good watch-dog, who patiently waits and watches without ever getting in his master's way.

La Valliere, terror-stricken at the king's irritated aspect, rose a second time, and assuming a posture full of humility and entreaty, murmured, "Forgive me, sire."

"What need is there for my forgiveness?" asked Louis.

"Sire, I have been guilty of a great fault; nay, more than a great fault, a great crime."

"You?"

"Sire, I have offended your majesty."

"Not in the slightest degree in the world," replied Louis XIV.

"I implore you, sire, not to maintain towards me that terrible seriousness of manner which reveals your majesty's just anger. I feel I have offended you, sire; but I wish to explain to you how it was that I have not offended you of my own accord."

"In the first place," said the king, "in what way can you possibly have offended me? I cannot perceive how. Surely not on account of a young girl's harmless and very innocent jest? You turned the credulity of a young man into ridicule - it was very natural to do so: any other woman in your place would have done the same."

"Oh! your majesty overwhelms me by your remark."

"Why so?"

"Because, if I had been the author of the jest, it would not have been innocent."

"Well, is that all you had to say to me in soliciting an audience?" said the king, as though about to turn away.

Thereupon La Valliere, in an abrupt and a broken voice, her eyes dried up by the fire of her tears, made a step towards the king, and said, "Did your majesty hear everything?"

"Everything, what?"

"Everything I said beneath the royal oak."

"I did not lose a syllable."

"And now, after your majesty really heard all, are you able to think I abused your credibility?"

"Credulity; yes, indeed, you have selected the very word."

"And your majesty did not suppose that a poor girl like myself might possibly be compelled to submit to the will of others?"

"Forgive me," returned the king; "but I shall never be able to understand that she, who of her own free will could express herself so unreservedly beneath the royal oak, would allow herself to be influenced to such an extent by the direction of others."

"But the threat held out against me, sire."

"Threat! who threatened you - who dared to threaten you?"

"Those who have the right to do so, sire."

"I do not recognize any one as possessing the right to threaten the humblest of my subjects."

"Forgive me, sire, but near your majesty, even, there are persons sufficiently high in position to have, or to believe that they possess, the right of injuring a young girl, without fortune, and possessing only her reputation."

"In what way injure her?"

"In depriving her of her reputation, by disgracefully expelling her from the court."

"Oh! Mademoiselle de la Valliere," said the king bitterly, "I prefer those persons who exculpate themselves without incriminating others."

"Sire!"

"Yes; and I confess that I greatly regret to perceive, that an easy justification, as your own would have been, is now complicated in my presence by a tissue of reproaches and imputations against others."

"And which you do not believe?" exclaimed La Valliere. The king remained silent.

"Nay, but tell me!" repeated La Valliere, vehemently.

"I regret to confess it," repeated the king, bowing coldly.

The young girl uttered a deep groan, striking her hands together in despair. "You do not believe me, then," she said to the king, who still remained silent, while poor La Valliere's features became visibly changed at his continued silence. "Therefore, you believe," she said, "that I pre-arranged this ridiculous, this infamous plot, of trifling, in so shameless a manner, with your majesty."

"Nay," said the king, "it was neither ridiculous nor infamous; it was not even a plot; merely a jest, more or less amusing, and nothing more."

"Oh!" murmured the young girl, "the king does not, and will not believe me, then?"

"No, indeed, I will not believe you," said the king. "Besides, in point of fact, what can be more natural? The king, you argue, follows me, listens to me, watches me; the king wishes perhaps to amuse himself at my expense, I will amuse myself at his, and as the king is very tender-hearted, I will take his heart by storm."

La Valliere hid her face in her hands, as she stifled her sobs. The king continued pitilessly; he was revenging himself upon the poor victim before him for all he had himself suffered.

"Let us invent, then, this story of my loving him and preferring him to others. The king is so simple and so conceited that he will believe me; and then we can go and tell others how credulous the king is, and can enjoy a laugh at his expense."

"Oh!" exclaimed La Valliere, "you think that, you believe that! - it is frightful."

"And," pursued the king, "that is not all; if this self-conceited prince take our jest seriously, if he should be imprudent enough to exhibit before others anything like delight at it, well, in that case, the king will be humiliated before the whole court; and what a delightful story it will be, too, for him to whom I am really attached, in fact part of my dowry for my husband, to have the adventure to relate of the monarch who was so amusingly deceived by a young girl."

"Sire!" exclaimed La Valliere, her mind bewildered, almost wandering, indeed, "not another word, I implore you; do you not see that you are killing me?"

"A jest, nothing but a jest," murmured the king, who, however, began to be somewhat affected.

La Valliere fell upon her knees, and that so violently, that the sound could be heard upon the hard floor. "Sire," she said, "I prefer shame to disloyalty."

"What do you mean?" inquired the king, without moving a step to raise the young girl from her knees.

"Sire, when I shall have sacrificed my honor and my reason both to you, you will perhaps believe in my loyalty. The tale which was related to you in Madame's apartments, and by Madame herself, is utterly false; and that which I said beneath the great oak - "

"Well!"

"That is the only truth."

"What!" exclaimed the king.

"Sire," exclaimed La Valliere, hurried away by the violence of her emotions, "were I to die of shame on the very spot where my knees are fixed, I would repeat it until my latest breath; I said that I loved you, and it is true; I do love you."

"You!"

"I have loved you, sire, from the very first day I ever saw you; from the moment when at Blois, where I was pining away my existence, your royal looks, full of light and life, were first bent upon me. I love you still, sire; it is a crime of high treason, I know, that a poor girl like myself should love her sovereign, and should presume to tell him so. Punish me for my audacity, despise me for my shameless immodesty; but do not ever say, do not ever think, that I have jested with or deceived you. I belong to a family whose loyalty has been proved, sire, and I, too, love my king."

Suddenly her strength, voice, and respiration ceased, and she fell forward, like the flower Virgil alludes to, which the scythe of the reaper severed in the midst of the grass. The king, at these words, at this vehement entreaty, no longer retained any ill-will or doubt in his mind: his whole heart seemed to expand at the glowing breath of an affection which proclaimed itself in such noble and courageous language. When, therefore, he heard the passionate confession, his strength seemed to fail him, and he hid his face in his hands. But when he felt La Valliere's hands clinging to his own, when their warm pressure fired his blood, he bent forward, and passing his arm round La Valliere's waist, he raised her from the ground and pressed her against his heart. But she, her drooping head fallen forward on her bosom, seemed to have ceased to live. The king, terrified, called out for Saint-Aignan. Saint-Aignan, who had carried his discretion so far as to remain without stirring in his corner, pretending to wipe away a tear, ran forward at the king's summons. He then assisted Louis to seat the young girl upon a couch,

slapped her hands, sprinkled some Hungary water over her face, calling out all the while, "Come, come, it is all over; the king believes you, and forgives you. There, there now! take care, or you will agitate his majesty too much; his majesty is so sensitive, so tender-hearted. Now, really, Mademoiselle de la Valliere, you must pay attention, for the king is very pale."

The fact was, the king was visibly losing color. But La Valliere did not move.

"Do pray recover," continued Saint-Aignan. "I beg, I implore you; it is really time you should; think only of one thing, that if the king should become unwell, I should be obliged to summon his physician. What a state of things that would be! So do pray rouse yourself; make an effort, pray do, and do so at once, my dear."

It was difficult to display more persuasive eloquence than Saint-Aignan did, but something still more powerful, and of a more energetic nature than this eloquence, aroused La Valliere. The king, who was kneeling before her, covered the palms of her hands with those burning kisses which are to the hands what a kiss upon the lips is to the face. La Valliere's senses returned to her; she languidly opened her eyes and, with a dying look, murmured, "Oh! sire, has your majesty pardoned me, then?"

The king did not reply, for he was still too much overcome. Saint-Aignan

thought it was his duty again to retire, for he observed the passionate devotion which was displayed in the king's gaze. La Valliere rose.

"And now, sire, that I have justified myself, at least I trust so, in your majesty's eyes, grant me leave to retire into a convent. I shall bless your majesty all my life, and I shall die thanking and loving Heaven for having granted me one hour of perfect happiness."

"No, no," replied the king, "you will live here blessing Heaven, on the contrary, but loving Louis, who will make your existence one of perfect felicity - Louis who loves you - Louis who swears it."

"Oh! sire, sire!"

And upon this doubt of La Valliere, the king's kisses became so warm that Saint-Aignan thought it was his duty to retire behind the tapestry. These kisses, however, which she had not the strength at first to resist, began to intimidate the young girl.

"Oh! sire," she exclaimed, "do not make me repeat my loyalty, for this would show me that your majesty despises me still."

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere," said the king, suddenly, drawing back with an air full of respect, "there is nothing in the world that I love and honor more than yourself, and nothing in my court, I call Heaven to witness, shall be so highly regarded as you shall be henceforward. I

entreat your forgiveness for my transport; it arose from an excess of affection, but I can prove to you that I love you more than ever by respecting you as much as you can possibly desire or deserve." Then, bending before her, and taking her by the hand, he said to her, "Will you honor me by accepting the kiss I press upon your hand?" And the king's lips were pressed respectfully and lightly upon the young girl's trembling hand. "Henceforth," added Louis, rising and bending his glance upon La Valliere, "henceforth you are under my safeguard. Do not speak to any one of the injury I have done you, forgive others that which they may have attempted. For the future, you shall be so far above all those, that, far from inspiring you with fear, they shall be even beneath your pity." And he bowed as reverently as though he were leaving a place of worship. Then calling to Saint-Aignan, who approached with great humility, he said, "I hope, comte, that Mademoiselle de la Valliere will kindly confer a little of her friendship upon you, in return for that which I have vowed to her eternally."

Saint-Aignan bent his knee before La Valliere, saying, "How happy, indeed, would such an honor make me!"

"I will send your companion back to you," said the king. "Farewell! or, rather, adieu till we meet again; do not forget me in your prayers, I entreat."

"Oh!" cried La Valliere, "be assured that you and Heaven are in my heart together."

These words of Louise elated the king, who, full of happiness, hurried Saint-Aignan down the stairs. Madame had not anticipated this _denouement_; and neither the Naiad nor the Dryad had breathed a word about it.