

Chapter 62

The Shower of Rain.

At this moment, and in the same direction, too, that the king and La Valliere had taken, except that they were in the wood itself instead of following the path, two men were walking together, utterly indifferent to the appearance of the heavens. Their heads were bent down in the manner of people occupied with matters of great moment. They had not observed either De Guiche or Madame, the king or La Valliere. Suddenly something fell through the air like a colossal sheet of flame, followed by a loud but distant rumbling noise.

"Ah!" said one of them, raising his head, "here comes the storm. Let us reach our carriages, my dear D'Herblay."

Aramis looked inquiringly at the heavens. "There is no occasion to hurry yet," he said; and then resuming the conversation where it had doubtless been interrupted, he said, "You were observing that the letter we wrote last evening must by this time have reached its destination?"

"I was saying that she certainly has it."

"Whom did you send it by?"

"By my own servant, as I have already told you."

"Did he bring back an answer?"

"I have not seen him since; the young girl was probably in attendance on Madame, or was in her own room dressing, and he may have had to wait. Our time for leaving arrived, and we set off, of course; I cannot, therefore, know what is going on yonder."

"Did you see the king before leaving?"

"Yes."

"How did he seem?"

"Nothing could have passed off better, or worse; according as he be sincere or hypocritical."

"And the _fete?_"

"Will take place in a month."

"He invited himself, you say?"

"With a pertinacity in which I detected Colbert's influence. But has not last night removed your illusions?"

"What illusions?"

"With respect to the assistance you may be able to give me under these circumstances."

"No; I have passed the night writing, and all my orders are given."

"Do not conceal it from yourself, D'Herblay, but the fete will cost some millions."

"I will supply six; do you on your side get two or three."

"You are a wonderful man, my dear D'Herblay."

Aramis smiled.

"But," inquired Fouquet, with some remaining uneasiness, "how is it that while you are now squandering millions in this manner, a few days ago you did not pay the fifty thousand francs to Baisemeaux out of your own pocket?"

"Because a few days ago I was as poor as Job."

"And to-day?"

"To-day I am wealthier than the king himself."

"Very well," said Fouquet; "I understand men pretty well; I know you are incapable of forfeiting your word; I do not wish to wrest your secret from you, and so let us talk no more about it."

At this moment a dull, heavy rumbling was heard, which suddenly developed into a violent clap of thunder.

"Oh, oh!" said Fouquet, "I was quite right in what I said."

"Come," said Aramis, "let us rejoin the carriages."

"We shall not have time," said Fouquet, "for here comes the rain."

In fact, as he spoke, and as if the heavens were opened, a shower of large drops of rain was suddenly heard pattering on the leaves about them.

"We shall have time," said Aramis, "to reach the carriages before the foliage becomes saturated."

"It will be better," said Fouquet, "to take shelter somewhere - in a grotto, for instance."

"Yes, but where are we to find a grotto?" inquired Aramis.

"I know one," said Fouquet, smiling, "not ten paces from here." Then

looking round him, he added: "Yes, we are quite right."

"You are very fortunate to have so good a memory," said Aramis, smiling in his turn, "but are you not afraid that your coachman, finding we do not return, will suppose we have taken another road back, and that he will not follow the carriages belonging to the court?"

"Oh, there is no fear of that," said Fouquet; "whenever I place my coachman and my carriage in any particular spot, nothing but an express order from the king could stir them; and more than that, too, it seems that we are not the only ones who have come so far, for I hear footsteps and the sound of voices."

As he spoke, Fouquet turned round, and opened with his cane a mass of foliage which hid the path from his view. Aramis's glance as well as his own plunged at the same moment through the aperture he had made.

"A woman," said Aramis.

"And a man," said Fouquet.

"It is La Valliere and the king," they both exclaimed together.

"Oh, oh!" said Aramis, "is his majesty aware of your cavern as well? I should not be astonished if he were, for he seems to be on very good terms with the dryads of Fontainebleau."

"Never mind," said Fouquet; "let us get there. If he is not aware of it, we shall see what he will do if he should know it, as it has two entrances, so that whilst he enters by one, we can leave by the other."

"Is it far?" asked Aramis, "for the rain is beginning to penetrate."

"We are there now," said Fouquet, as he pushed aside a few branches, and an excavation in the solid rock could be observed, hitherto concealed by heaths, ivy, and a thick covert of small shrubs.

Fouquet led the way, followed by Aramis; but as the latter entered the grotto, he turned round, saying: "Yes, they are entering the wood; and, see, they are bending their steps this way."

"Very well; let us make room for them," said Fouquet, smiling and pulling Aramis by his cloak; "but I do not think the king knows of my grotto."

"Yes," said Aramis, "they are looking about them, but it is only for a thicker tree."

Aramis was not mistaken, the king's looks were directed upward, and not around him. He held La Valliere's arm within his own, and held her hand in his. La Valliere's feet began to sleep on the damp grass. Louis again looked round him with greater attention than before, and perceiving an enormous oak with wide-spreading branches, he hurriedly drew La

Valliere beneath its protecting shelter. The poor girl looked round her on all sides, and seemed half afraid, half desirous of being followed. The king made her lean back against the trunk of the tree, whose vast circumference, protected by the thickness of the foliage, was as dry as if at that moment the rain had not been falling in torrents. He himself remained standing before her with his head uncovered. After a few minutes, however, some drops of rain penetrated through the branches of the tree and fell on the king's forehead, who did not pay any attention to them.

"Oh, sire!" murmured La Valliere, pushing the king's hat towards him. But the king simply bowed, and determinedly refused to cover his head.

"Now or never is the time to offer your place," said Fouquet in Aramis's ear.

"Now or never is the time to listen, and not lose a syllable of what they may have to say to each other," replied Aramis in Fouquet's ear.

In fact they both remained perfectly silent, and the king's voice reached them where they were.

"Believe me," said the king, "I perceive, or rather I can imagine your uneasiness; believe me, I sincerely regret having isolated you from the rest of the company, and brought you, also, to a spot where you will be inconvenienced by the rain. You are wet already, and perhaps cold too?"

"No, sire."

"And yet you tremble?"

"I am afraid, sire, that my absence may be misinterpreted; at a moment, too, when all the others are reunited."

"I would not hesitate to propose returning to the carriages, Mademoiselle de la Valliere, but pray look and listen, and tell me if it be possible to attempt to make the slightest progress at present?"

In fact the thunder was still rolling, and the rain continued to fall in torrents.

"Besides," continued the king, "no possible interpretation can be made which would be to your discredit. Are you not with the king of France; in other words, with the first gentleman of the kingdom?"

"Certainly, sire," replied La Valliere, "and it is a very distinguished honor for me; it is not, therefore, for myself that I fear any interpretations that may be made."

"For whom, then?"

"For you, sire."

"For _me?_" said the king, smiling, "I do not understand you."

"Has your majesty already forgotten what took place yesterday evening in her royal highness's apartments?"

"Oh! forget that, I beg, or allow me to remember it for no other purpose than to thank you once more for your letter, and - "

"Sire," interrupted La Valliere, "the rain is falling, and your majesty's head is uncovered."

"I entreat you not to think of anything but yourself."

"Oh! I," said La Valliere, smiling, "I am a country girl, accustomed to roaming through the meadows of the Loire and the gardens of Blois, whatever the weather may be. And, as for my clothes," she added, looking at her simple muslin dress, "your majesty sees there is but little room for injury."

"Indeed, I have already noticed, more than once, that you owed nearly everything to yourself and nothing to your toilette. Your freedom from coquetry is one of your greatest charms in my eyes."

"Sire, do not make me out better than I am, and say merely, 'You cannot possibly be a coquette.'"

"Why so?"

"Because," said La Valliere, smiling, "I am not rich."

"You admit, then," said the king, quickly, "that you have a love for beautiful things?"

"Sire, I only regard those things as beautiful which are within my reach. Everything which is too highly placed for me - "

"You are indifferent to?"

"Is foreign to me, as being prohibited."

"And I," said the king, "do not find that you are at my court on the footing you should be. The services of your family have not been sufficiently brought under my notice. The advancement of your family was cruelly neglected by my uncle."

"On the contrary, sire. His royal highness, the Duke of Orleans, was always exceedingly kind towards M. de Saint-Remy, my step-father. The services rendered were humble, and, properly speaking, our services have been adequately recognized. It is not every one who is happy enough to find opportunities of serving his sovereign with distinction. I have no doubt at all, that, if ever opportunities had been met with, my family's

actions would have been as lofty as their loyalty was firm: but that happiness was never ours."

"In that case, Mademoiselle de la Valliere, it belongs to kings to repair the want of opportunity, and most delightedly do I undertake to repair, in your instance, and with the least possible delay, the wrongs of fortune towards you."

"Nay, sire," cried La Valliere, eagerly; "leave things, I beg, as they are now."

"Is it possible! you refuse what I ought, and what I wish to do for you?"

"All I desired has been granted me, when the honor was conferred upon me of forming one of Madame's household."

"But if you refuse for yourself, at least accept for your family."

"Your generous intentions, sire, bewilder me and make me apprehensive, for, in doing for my family what your kindness urges you to do, your majesty will raise up enemies for us, and enemies for yourself, too. Leave me in the ranks of middle life, sire; of all the feelings and sentiments I experience, leave me to enjoy the pleasing instinct of disinterestedness."

"The sentiments you express," said the king, "are indeed admirable."

"Quite true," murmured Aramis in Fouquet's ear, "and he cannot be accustomed to them."

"But," replied Fouquet, "suppose she were to make a similar reply to my letter."

"True!" said Aramis, "let us not anticipate, but wait the conclusion."

"And then, dear Monsieur d'Herblay," added the superintendent, hardly able to appreciate the sentiments which La Valliere had just expressed, "it is very often sound calculation to seem disinterested with monarchs."

"Exactly what I was thinking this very minute," said Aramis. "Let us listen."

The king approached nearer to La Valliere, and as the rain dripped more and more through the foliage of the oak, he held his hat over the head of the young girl, who raised her beautiful blue eyes towards the royal hat which sheltered her, and shook her head, sighing deeply as she did so.

"What melancholy thought," said the king, "can possibly reach your heart when I place mine as a rampart before it?"

"I will tell you, sire. I had already once before broached this question, which is so difficult for a young girl of my age to discuss, but your

majesty imposed silence on me. Your majesty belongs not to yourself alone: you are married; and every sentiment which would separate your majesty from the queen, in leading you to take notice of me, will be a source of profoundest sorrow for the queen." The king endeavored to interrupt the young girl, but she continued with a suppliant gesture.

"The Queen Maria, with an attachment which can be well understood, follows with her eyes every step of your majesty which separates you from her. Happy enough in having had her fate united to your own, she weepingly implores Heaven to preserve you to her, and is jealous of the faintest throb of your heart bestowed elsewhere." The king again seemed anxious to speak, but again did La Valliere venture to prevent him. -

"Would it not, therefore, be a most blamable action," she continued, "if your majesty, a witness of this anxious and disinterested affection, gave the queen any cause for jealousy? Forgive me, sire, for the expressions I have used. I well know it is impossible, or rather that it would be impossible, that the greatest queen of the whole world could be jealous of a poor girl like myself. But though a queen, she is still a woman, and her heart, like that of the rest of her sex, cannot close itself against the suspicions which such as are evilly disposed, insinuate. For Heaven's sake, sire, think no more of me; I am unworthy of your regard."

"Do you not know that in speaking as you have done, you change my esteem for you into the profoundest admiration?"

"Sire, you assume my words to be contrary to the truth; you suppose me to be better than I really am, and attach a greater merit to me than God

ever intended should be the case. Spare me, sire; for, did I not know that your majesty was the most generous man in your kingdom, I should believe you were jesting."

"You do not, I know, fear such a thing; I am quite sure of that," exclaimed Louis.

"I shall be obliged to believe it, if your majesty continues to hold such language towards me."

"I am most unhappy, then," said the king, in a tone of regret which was not assumed; "I am the unhappiest prince in the Christian world, since I am powerless to induce belief in my words, in one whom I love the best in the wide world, and who almost breaks my heart by refusing to credit my regard for her."

"Oh, sire!" said La Valliere, gently putting the king aside, who had approached nearer to her, "I think the storm has passed away now, and the rain has ceased." At the very moment, however, as the poor girl, fleeing as it were from her own heart, which doubtless throbbed but too well in unison with the king's, uttered these words, the storm undertook to contradict her. A dead-white flash of lightning illumined the forest with a weird glare, and a peal of thunder, like a discharge of artillery, burst over their heads, as if the height of the oak that sheltered them had attracted the storm. The young girl could not repress a cry of terror. The king with one hand drew her towards his heart, and stretched

the other above her head, as though to shield her from the lightning. A moment's silence ensued, as the group, delightful as everything young and loving is delightful, remained motionless, while Fouquet and Aramis contemplated it in attitudes as motionless as La Valliere and the king. "Oh, sire!" murmured La Valliere, "do you hear?" and her head fell upon his shoulder.

"Yes," said the king. "You see, the storm has not passed away."

"_It is a warning, sire_" The king smiled. "Sire, it is the voice of Heaven in anger."

"Be it so," said the king. "I agree to accept that peal of thunder as a warning, and even as a menace, if, in five minutes from the present moment, it is renewed with equal violence; but if not, permit me to think that the storm is a storm simply, and nothing more." And the king, at the same moment, raised his head, as if to interrogate the heavens. But, as if the remark had been heard and accepted, during the five minutes which elapsed after the burst of thunder which had alarmed them, no renewed peal was heard; and, when the thunder was again heard, it was passing as plainly as if, during those same five minutes, the storm, put to flight, had traversed the heavens with the wings of the wind. "Well, Louise," said the king, in a low tone of voice, "do you still threaten me with the anger of Heaven? and, since you wished to regard the storm as a warning, do you still believe it bodes misfortune?"

The young girl looked up, and saw that while they had been talking, the rain had penetrated the foliage above them, and was trickling down the king's face. "Oh, sire, sire!" she exclaimed, in accents of eager apprehensions, which greatly agitated the king. "Is it for me," she murmured, "that the king remains thus uncovered, and exposed to the rain? What am I, then?"

"You are, you perceive," said the king, "the divinity who dissipates the storm, and brings back fine weather." In fact, even as the king spoke, a ray of sunlight streamed through the forest, and caused the rain-drops which rested upon the leaves, or fell vertically among the openings in the branches of the trees, to glisten like diamonds.

"Sire," said La Valliere, almost overcome, but making a powerful effort over herself, "think of the anxieties your majesty will have to submit to on my account. At this very moment, they are seeking you in every direction. The queen must be full of uneasiness; and Madame - oh, Madame!" the young girl exclaimed, with an expression almost resembling terror.

This name had a certain effect upon the king. He started, and disengaged himself from La Valliere, whom he had, till that moment, held pressed against his heart. He then advanced towards the path, in order to look round, and returned, somewhat thoughtfully, to La Valliere.

"Madame, did you say?" he remarked.

"Yes, Madame; she, too, is jealous," said La Valliere, with a marked tone of voice; and her eyes, so timorous in their expression, and so modestly fugitive in their glance, for a moment, ventured to look inquiringly into the king's.

"Still," returned Louis, making an effort over himself, "it seems to me that Madame has no reason, no right to be jealous of me."

"Alas!" murmured La Valliere.

"Are you, too," said the king, almost in a tone of reproach, "are you among those who think the sister has a right to be jealous of the brother?"

"It is not for me, sire, to seek to penetrate your majesty's secrets."

"You do believe it, then?" exclaimed the king.

"I believe Madame is jealous, sire," La Valliere replied, firmly.

"Is it possible," said the king with some anxiety, "that you have perceived it, then, from her conduct towards you? Have her manners in any way been such towards you that you can attribute them to the jealousy you speak of?"

"Not at all, sire; I am of so little importance."

"Oh! if it were really the case - " exclaimed Louis, violently.

"Sire," interrupted the young girl, "it has ceased raining; some one is coming, I think." And, forgetful of all etiquette, she had seized the king by the arm.

"Well," replied the king, "let them come. Who is there who would venture to think I had done wrong in remaining alone with Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

"For pity's sake, sire! they will think it strange to see you wet through, in this manner, and that you should have run such risk for me."

"I have simply done my duty as a gentleman," said Louis; "and woe to him who may fail in his, in criticising his sovereign's conduct." In fact, at this moment a few eager and curious faces were seen in the walk, as if engaged in a search. Catching glimpses at last of the king and La Valliere, they seemed to have found what they were seeking. They were some of the courtiers who had been sent by the queen and Madame, and uncovered themselves, in token of having perceived his majesty. But Louis, notwithstanding La Valliere's confusion, did not quit his respectful and tender attitude. Then, when all the courtiers were assembled in the walk - when every one had been able to perceive the extraordinary mark of deference with which he had treated the young girl, by remaining standing and bare-headed during the storm - he offered her

his arm, led her towards the group who were waiting, recognized by an inclination of the head the respectful salutations which were paid him on all sides; and, still holding his hat in his hand, he conducted her to her carriage. And, as a few sparse drops of rain continued to fall - a last adieu of the vanishing storm - the other ladies, whom respect had prevented from getting into their carriages before the king, remained altogether unprotected by hood or cloak, exposed to the rain from which the king was protecting, as well as he was able, the humblest among them. The queen and Madame must, like the others, have witnessed this exaggerated courtesy of the king. Madame was so disconcerted at it, that she touched the queen with her elbow, saying at the same time, "Look there, look there."

The queen closed her eyes as if she had been suddenly seized with a fainting-spell. She lifted her hands to her face and entered her carriage, Madame following her. The king again mounted his horse, and without showing a preference for any particular carriage door, he returned to Fontainebleau, the reins hanging over his horse's neck, absorbed in thought. As soon as the crowd had disappeared, and the sound of the horses and carriages grew fainter in the distance, and when they were certain, in fact, that no one could see them, Aramis and Fouquet came out of their grotto, and both of them in silence passed slowly on towards the walk. Aramis looked most narrowly not only at the whole extent of the open space stretching out before and behind him, but even into the very depth of the wood.

"Monsieur Fouquet," he said, when he had quite satisfied himself that they were alone, "we must get back, at any cost, that letter you wrote to La Valliere."

"That will be easy enough," said Fouquet, "if my servant has not given it to her."

"In any case it must be had, do you understand?"

"Yes. The king is in love with the girl, you mean?"

"Deeply, and what is worse is, that on her side, the girl is passionately attached to him."

"As much as to say that we must change our tactics, I suppose?"

"Not a doubt of it; you have no time to lose. You must see La Valliere, and, without thinking any more of becoming her lover, which is out of the question, must declare yourself her most devoted friend and her most humble servant."

"I will do so," replied Fouquet, "and without the slightest feeling of disinclination, for she seems a good-hearted girl."

"Or a very clever one," said Aramis; "but in that case, all the greater reason." Then he added, after a moment's pause, "If I am not mistaken,

that girl will become the strongest passion of the king's life. Let us return to our carriage, and, as fast as possible, to the chateau."