

## Chapter 63

Toby.

Two hours after the superintendent's carriage had set off by Aramis's directions, conveying them both towards Fontainebleau with the fleetness of the clouds the last breath of the tempest was hurrying across the face of heaven, La Valliere was closeted in her own apartment, with a simple muslin wrapper round her, having just finished a slight repast, which was placed upon a marble table. Suddenly the door was opened, and a servant entered to announce M. Fouquet, who had called to request permission to pay his respects to her. She made him repeat the message twice over, for the poor girl only knew M. Fouquet by name, and could not conceive what business she could possibly have with a superintendent of finances. However, as he might represent the king - and, after the conversation we have recorded, it was very likely - she glanced at her mirror, drew out still more the ringlets of her hair, and desired him to be admitted. La Valliere could not, however, refrain from a certain feeling of uneasiness. A visit from the superintendent was not an ordinary event in the life of any woman attached to the court. Fouquet, so notorious for his generosity, his gallantry, and his sensitive delicacy of feeling with regard to women generally, had received more invitations than he had requested audiences. In many houses, the presence of the superintendent had been significant of fortune; in many hearts, of love. Fouquet entered the apartment with a manner full of respect, presenting himself with that ease and gracefulness of manner which was the distinctive characteristic of the men of eminence of that period, and which at the

present day seems no longer to be understood, even through the interpretation of the portraits of the period, in which the painter has endeavored to recall them to being. La Valliere acknowledged the ceremonious salutation which Fouquet addressed to her by a gentle inclination of the head, and motioned him to a seat. But Fouquet, with a bow, said, "I will not sit down until you have pardoned me."

"I?" asked La Valliere, "pardon what?"

Fouquet fixed a most piercing look upon the young girl, and fancied he could perceive in her face nothing but the most unaffected surprise. "I observe," he said, "that you have as much generosity as intelligence, and I read in your eyes the forgiveness I solicit. A pardon pronounced by your lips is insufficient for me, and I need the forgiveness of your heart and mind."

"Upon my honor, monsieur," said La Valliere, "I assure you most positively I do not understand your meaning."

"Again, that is a delicacy on your part which charms me," replied Fouquet, "and I see you do not wish me to blush before you."

"Blush! blush before \_me!\_ Why should you blush?"

"Can I have deceived myself," said Fouquet; "and can I have been happy enough not to have offended you by my conduct towards you?"

"Really, monsieur," said La Valliere, shrugging her shoulders, "you speak in enigmas, and I suppose I am too ignorant to understand you."

"Be it so," said Fouquet; "I will not insist. Tell me, only, I entreat you, that I may rely upon your full and complete forgiveness."

"I have but one reply to make to you, monsieur," said La Valliere, somewhat impatiently, "and I hope that will satisfy you. If I knew the wrong you have done me, I would forgive you, and I now do so with still greater reason since I am ignorant of the wrong you allude to."

Fouquet bit his lips, as Aramis would have done. "In that case," he said, "I may hope, that, notwithstanding what has happened, our good understanding will remain undisturbed, and that you will kindly confer the favor upon me of believing in my respectful friendship."

La Valliere fancied that she now began to understand, and said to herself, "I should not have believed M. Fouquet so eager to seek the source of a favor so very recent," and then added aloud, "Your friendship, monsieur! you offer me your friendship. The honor, on the contrary, is mine, and I feel overpowered by it."

"I am aware," replied Fouquet, "that the friendship of the master may appear more brilliant and desirable than that of the servant; but I assure you the latter will be quite as devoted, quite as faithful, and

altogether disinterested."

La Valliere bowed, for, in fact, the voice of the superintendent seemed to convey both conviction and real devotion in its tone, and she held out her hand to him, saying, "I believe you."

Fouquet eagerly took hold of the young girl's hand. "You see no difficulty, therefore," he added, "in restoring me that unhappy letter."

"What letter?" inquired La Valliere.

Fouquet interrogated her with his most searching gaze, as he had already done before, but the same ingenious expressions, the same transparently candid look met his. "I am obliged to confess," he said, after this denial, "that your heart is the most delicate in the world, and I should not feel I was a man of honor and uprightness if I were to suspect anything from a woman so generous as yourself."

"Really, Monsieur Fouquet," replied La Valliere, "it is with profound regret I am obliged to repeat that I absolutely understand nothing of what you refer to."

"In fact, then, upon your honor, mademoiselle, you have not received any letter from me?"

"Upon my honor, none," replied La Valliere, firmly.

"Very well, that is quite sufficient; permit me, then, to renew the assurance of my utmost esteem and respect," said Fouquet. Then, bowing, he left the room to seek Aramis, who was waiting for him in his own apartment, and leaving La Valliere to ask herself whether the superintendent had not lost his senses.

"Well!" inquired Aramis, who was impatiently waiting Fouquet's return, "are you satisfied with the favorite?"

"Enchanted," replied Fouquet; "she is a woman full of intelligence and fine feeling."

"She did not get angry, then?"

"Far from that - she did not even seem to understand."

"To understand what?"

"To understand that I had written to her."

"She must, however, have understood you sufficiently to give the letter back to you, for I presume she returned it."

"Not at all."

"At least, you satisfied yourself that she had burnt it."

"My dear Monsieur d'Herblay, I have been playing at cross-purposes for more than an hour, and, however amusing it may be, I begin to have had enough of this game. So understand me thoroughly: the girl pretended not to understand what I was saying to her; she denied having received any letter; therefore, having positively denied its receipt, she was unable either to return or burn it."

"Oh, oh!" said Aramis, with uneasiness, "what is this you tell me?"

"I say that she swore most positively she had not received any letter."

"That is too much. And did you not insist?"

"On the contrary, I did insist, almost impertinently even."

"And she persisted in her denial?"

"Unhesitatingly."

"And did she not contradict herself?"

"Not once."

"But, in that case, then, you have left our letter in her hands?"

"How could I do otherwise?"

"Oh! it was a great mistake."

"What the deuce would you have done in my place?"

"One could not force her, certainly, but it is very embarrassing; such a letter ought not to remain in existence against us."

"Oh! the young girl's disposition is generosity itself; I looked at her eyes, and I can read eyes well."

"You think she can be relied upon?"

"From my heart I do."

"Well, I think we are mistaken."

"In what way?"

"I think that, in point of fact, as she herself told you, she did not receive the letter."

"What! do you suppose - "

"I suppose that, from some motive, of which we know nothing, your man did not deliver the letter to her."

Fouquet rang the bell. A servant appeared. "Send Toby here," he said. A moment afterwards a man made his appearance, with an anxious, restless look, shrewd expression of the mouth, with short arms, and his back somewhat bent. Aramis fixed a penetrating look upon him.

"Will you allow me to interrogate him myself?" inquired Aramis.

"Do so," said Fouquet.

Aramis was about to say something to the lackey, when he paused. "No," he said; "he would see that we attach too much importance to his answer; therefore question him yourself; I will pretend to be writing." Aramis accordingly placed himself at a table, his back turned towards the old attendant, whose every gesture and look he watched in a looking-glass opposite to him.

"Come here, Toby," said Fouquet to the valet, who approached with a tolerably firm step. "How did you execute my commission?" inquired Fouquet.

"In the usual way, monseigneur," replied the man.

"But how, tell me?"



"I succeeded in penetrating as far as Mademoiselle de la Valliere's apartment; but she was at mass, and so I placed the note on her toilette-table. Is not that what you told me to do?"

"Precisely; and is that all?"

"Absolutely all, monseigneur."

"No one was there?"

"No one."

"Did you conceal yourself as I told you?"

"Yes."

"And she returned?"

"Ten minutes afterwards."

"And no one could have taken the letter?"

"No one; for no one had entered the room."

"From the outside, but from the interior?"

"From the place where I was secreted, I could see to the very end of the room."

"Now listen to me," said Fouquet, looking fixedly at the lackey; "if this letter did not reach its proper destination, confess it; for, if a mistake has been made, your head shall be the forfeit."

Toby started, but immediately recovered himself. "Monseigneur," he said, "I placed the letter on the very place I told you: and I ask only half an hour to prove to you that the letter is in Mademoiselle de la Valliere's hand, or to bring you back the letter itself."

Aramis looked at the valet scrutinizingly. Fouquet was ready in placing confidence in people, and for twenty years this man had served him faithfully. "Go," he said; "but bring me the proof you speak of." The lackey quitted the room.

"Well, what do you think of it?" inquired Fouquet of Aramis.

"I think that you must, by some means or another, assure yourself of the truth, either that the letter has, or has not, reached La Valliere; that, in the first case, La Valliere must return it to you, or satisfy you by burning it in your presence; that, in the second, you must have the letter back again, even were it to cost you a million. Come, is not that your opinion?"

"Yes; but still, my dear bishop, I believe you are exaggerating the importance of the affair."

"Blind, how blind you are!" murmured Aramis.

"La Valliere," returned Fouquet, "whom we assume to be a schemer of the first ability, is simply nothing more than a coquette, who hopes that I shall pay my court to her, because I have already done so, and who, now that she has received a confirmation of the king's regard, hopes to keep me in leading strings with the letter. It is natural enough."

Aramis shook his head.

"Is not that your opinion?" said Fouquet.

"She is not a coquette," he replied.

"Allow me to tell you - "

"Oh! I am well enough acquainted with women who are coquettes," said Aramis.

"My dear friend!"

"It is a long time ago since I finished my education, you mean. But

women are the same, throughout the centuries."

"True; but men change, and you at the present day are far more suspicious than you formerly were." And then, beginning to laugh, he added, "Come, if La Valliere is willing to love me only to the extent of a third, and the king two-thirds, do you think the condition acceptable?"

Aramis rose impatiently. "La Valliere," he said, "has never loved, and never will love, any one but the king."

"At all events," said Fouquet, "what would you do?"

"Ask me rather what I would have done?"

"Well! what would you have done?"

"In the first place, I should not have allowed that man to depart."

"Toby?"

"Yes; Toby is a traitor. Nay, I am sure of it, and I would not have let him go until he had told me the truth."

"There is still time. I will recall him, and do you question him in your turn."

"Agreed."

"But I assure you it is useless. He has been with me for twenty years, and has never made the slightest mistake, and yet," added Fouquet, laughing, "it would have been easy enough for him to have done so."

"Still, call him back. This morning I fancy I saw that face, in earnest conversation with one of M. Colbert's men."

"Where was that?"

"Opposite the stables."

"Bah! all my people are at daggers drawn with that fellow."

"I saw him, I tell you, and his face, which should have been unknown to me when he entered just now, struck me as disagreeably familiar."

"Why did you not say something, then, while he was here?"

"Because it is only at this very minute that my memory is clear upon the subject."

"Really," said Fouquet, "you alarm me." And he again rang the bell.

"Provided that it is not already too late," said Aramis.

Fouquet once more rang impatiently. The valet usually in attendance appeared. "Toby!" said Fouquet, "send Toby." The valet again shut the door.

"You leave me at perfect liberty, I suppose?"

"Entirely so."

"I may employ all means, then, to ascertain the truth."

"All."

"Intimidation, even?"

"I constitute you public prosecutor in my place."

They waited ten minutes longer, but uselessly, and Fouquet, thoroughly out of patience, again rang loudly.

"Toby!" he exclaimed.

"Monseigneur," said the valet, "they are looking for him."

"He cannot be far distant, I have not given him any commission to execute."

"I will go and see, monseigneur," replied the valet, as he closed the door. Aramis, during the interview, walked impatiently, but without a syllable, up and down the cabinet. They waited a further ten minutes. Fouquet rang in a manner to alarm the very dead. The valet again presented himself, trembling in a way to induce a belief that he was the bearer of bad news.

"Monseigneur is mistaken," he said, before even Fouquet could interrogate him, "you must have given Toby some commission, for he has been to the stables and taken your lordship's swiftest horse, and saddled it himself."

"Well?"

"And he has gone off."

"Gone!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Let him be pursued, let him be captured."

"Nay, nay," whispered Aramis, taking him by the hand, "be calm, the evil is done."

The valet quietly went out.

"The evil is done, you say?"

"No doubt; I was sure of it. And now, let us give no cause for

suspicion; we must calculate the result of the blow, and ward it off, if possible."

"After all," said Fouquet, "the evil is not great."

"You think so?" said Aramis.

"Of course. Surely a man is allowed to write a love-letter to a woman."

"A man, certainly; a subject, no; especially, too, when the woman in question is one with whom the king is in love."

"But the king was not in love with La Valliere a week ago! he was not in love with her yesterday, and the letter is dated yesterday; I could not guess the king was in love, when the king's affection was not even yet in existence."

"As you please," replied Aramis; "but unfortunately the letter is not dated, and it is that circumstance particularly which annoys me. If it had only been dated yesterday, I should not have the slightest shadow of uneasiness on your account."

Fouquet shrugged his shoulders.

"Am I not my own master," he said, "and is the king, then, king of my brain and of my flesh?"



"You are right," replied Aramis, "do not let us attach greater importance to matters than is necessary; and besides... Well! if we are menaced, we have means of defense."

"Oh! menaced!" said Fouquet, "you do not place this gnat bite, as it were, among the number of menaces which may compromise my fortune and my life, do you?"

"Do not forget, Monsieur Fouquet, that the bit of an insect can kill a giant, if the insect be venomous."

"But has this sovereign power you were speaking of, already vanished?"

"I am all-powerful, it is true, but I am not immortal."

"Come, then, the most pressing matter is to find Toby again, I suppose. Is not that your opinion?"

"Oh! as for that, you will not find him again," said Aramis, "and if he were of any great value to you, you must give him up for lost."

"At all events he is somewhere or another in the world," said Fouquet.

"You're right, let me act," replied Aramis.