

## Chapter 25

Despair.

As soon as the king was gone La Valliere raised herself from the ground, and stretched out her arms, as if to follow and detain him, but when, having violently closed the door, the sound of his retreating footsteps could be heard in the distance, she had hardly sufficient strength left to totter towards and fall at the foot of her crucifix. There she remained, broken-hearted, absorbed, and overwhelmed by her grief, forgetful and indifferent to everything but her profound sorrow; - a grief she only vaguely realized - as though by instinct. In the midst of this wild tumult of thoughts, La Valliere heard her door open again; she started, and turned round, thinking it was the king who had returned. She was deceived, however, for it was Madame who appeared at the door. What did she now care for Madame! Again she sank down, her head supported by her *\_prie-Dieu\_* chair. It was Madame, agitated, angry, and threatening. But what was that to her? "Mademoiselle," said the princess, standing before La Valliere, "this is very fine, I admit, to kneel and pray, and make a pretense of being religious; but however submissive you may be in your address to Heaven, it is desirable that you should pay some little attention to the wishes of those who reign and rule here below."

La Valliere raised her head painfully in token of respect.

"Not long since," continued Madame, "a certain recommendation was

addressed to you, I believe."

La Valliere's fixed and wild gaze showed how complete her forgetfulness or ignorance was.

"The queen recommended you," continued Madame, "to conduct yourself in such a manner that no one could be justified in spreading any reports about you."

La Valliere darted an inquiring look towards her.

"I will not," continued Madame, "allow my household, which is that of the first princess of the blood, to set an evil example to the court; you would be the cause of such an example. I beg you to understand, therefore, in the absence of any witness of your shame - for I do not wish to humiliate you - that you are from this moment at perfect liberty to leave, and that you can return to your mother at Blois."

La Valliere could not sink lower, nor could she suffer more than she had already suffered. Her countenance did not even change, but she remained kneeling with her hands clasped, like the figure of the Magdalen.

"Did you hear me?" said Madame.

A shiver, which passed through her whole frame, was La Valliere's only reply. And as the victim gave no other signs of life, Madame left the

room. And then, her very respiration suspended, and her blood almost congealed, as it were, in her veins, La Valliere by degrees felt that the pulsation of her wrists, her neck, and temples, began to throb more and more painfully. These pulsations, as they gradually increased, soon changed into a species of brain fever, and in her temporary delirium she saw the figures of her friends contending with her enemies, floating before her vision. She heard, too, mingled together in her deafened ears, words of menace and words of fond affection; she seemed raised out of her existence as though it were upon the wings of a mighty tempest, and in the dim horizon of the path along which her delirium hurried her, she saw the stone which covered her tomb upraised, and the grim, appalling texture of eternal night revealed to her distracted gaze. But the horror of the dream which possessed her senses faded away, and she was again restored to the habitual resignation of her character. A ray of hope penetrated her heart, as a ray of sunlight streams into the dungeon of some unhappy captive. Her mind reverted to the journey from Fontainebleau, she saw the king riding beside her carriage, telling her that he loved her, asking for her love in return, requiring her to swear, and himself to swear too, that never should an evening pass by, if ever a misunderstanding were to arise between them, without a visit, a letter, a sign of some kind, being sent, to replace the troubled anxiety of the evening with the calm repose of the night. It was the king who had suggested that, who had imposed a promise on her, and who had sworn to it himself. It was impossible, therefore, she reasoned, that the king should fail in keeping the promise which he had himself exacted from her, unless, indeed, Louis was a despot who enforced love as he enforced

obedience; unless, too, the king were so indifferent that the first obstacle in his way was sufficient to arrest his further progress. The king, that kind protector, who by a word, a single word, could relieve her distress of mind, the king even joined her persecutors. Oh! his anger could not possibly last. Now that he was alone, he would be suffering all that she herself was a prey to. But he was not tied hand and foot as she was; he could act, could move about, could come to her, while she could do nothing but wait. And the poor girl waited and waited, with breathless anxiety - for she could not believe it possible that the king would not come.

It was now about half-past ten. He would either come to her, or write to her, or send some kind word by M. de Saint-Aignan. If he were to come, oh! how she would fly to meet him; how she would thrust aside that excess of delicacy which she now discovered was misunderstood; how eagerly she would explain: "It is not I who do not love you - it is the fault of others who will not allow me to love you." And then it must be confessed that she reflected upon it, and also the more she reflected, Louis appeared to her to be less guilty. In fact, he was ignorant of everything. What must he have thought of the obstinacy with which she remained silent? Impatient and irritable as the king was known to be, it was extraordinary that he had been able to preserve his temper so long. And yet, had it been her own case, she undoubtedly would not have acted in such a manner; she would have understood - have guessed everything. Yes, but she was nothing but a poor simple-minded girl, and not a great and powerful monarch. Oh! if he would but come, if he would but come! -

how eagerly she would forgive him for all he had just made her suffer!  
how much more tenderly she would love him because she had so cruelly  
suffered! And so she sat, with her head bent forward in eager  
expectation towards the door, her lips slightly parted, as if - and  
Heaven forgive her for the mental exclamation! - they were awaiting the  
kiss which the king's lips had in the morning so sweetly indicated, when  
he pronounced the word \_love!\_ If the king did not come, at least he  
would write; it was a second chance; a chance less delightful certainly  
than the other, but which would show an affection just as strong, only  
more timid in its nature. Oh! how she would devour his letter, how eager  
she would be to answer it! and when the messenger who had brought it had  
left her, how she would kiss it, read it over and over again, press to  
her heart the lucky paper which would have brought her ease of mind,  
tranquillity, and perfect happiness. At all events, if the king did not  
come, if the king did not write, he could not do otherwise than send  
Saint-Aignan, or Saint-Aignan could not do otherwise than come of his own  
accord. Even if it were a third person, how openly she would speak to  
him; the royal presence would not be there to freeze her words upon her  
tongue, and then no suspicious feeling would remain a moment longer in  
the king's heart.

Everything with La Valliere, heart and look, body and mind, was  
concentrated in eager expectation. She said to herself that there was an  
hour left in which to indulge hope; that until midnight struck, the king  
might come, or write or send; that at midnight only would every  
expectation vanish, every hope be lost. Whenever she heard any stir in

the palace, the poor girl fancied she was the cause of it; whenever she heard any one pass in the courtyard below she imagined they were messengers of the king coming to her. Eleven o'clock struck, then a quarter-past eleven; then half-past. The minutes dragged slowly on in this anxiety, and yet they seemed to pass too quickly. And now, it struck a quarter to twelve. Midnight - midnight was near, the last, the final hope that remained. With the last stroke of the clock, the last ray of light seemed to fade away; and with the last ray faded her final hope. And so, the king himself had deceived her; it was he who had been the first to fail in keeping the oath which he had sworn that very day; twelve hours only between his oath and his perjured vow; it was not long, alas! to have preserved the illusion. And so, not only did the king not love her, but he despised her whom every one ill-treated, he despised her to the extent even of abandoning her to the shame of an expulsion which was equivalent to having an ignominious sentence passed on her; and yet, it was he, the king himself, who was the first cause of this ignominy. A bitter smile, the only symptom of anger which during this long conflict had passed across the angelic face, appeared upon her lips. What, in fact, now remained on earth for her, after the king was lost to her? Nothing. But Heaven still remained, and her thoughts flew thither. She prayed that the proper course for her to follow might be suggested. "It is from Heaven," she thought, "that I expect everything; it is from Heaven I ought to expect everything." And she looked at her crucifix with a devotion full of tender love. "There," she said, "hangs before me a Master who never forgets and never abandons those who neither forget nor abandon Him; it is to Him alone that we must sacrifice ourselves."

And, thereupon, could any one have gazed into the recesses of that chamber, they would have seen the poor despairing girl adopt a final resolution, and determine upon one last plan in her mind. Then, as her knees were no longer able to support her, she gradually sank down upon the *\_prie-Dieu\_*, and with her head pressed against the wooden cross, her eyes fixed, and her respiration short and quick, she watched for the earliest rays of approaching daylight. At two o'clock in the morning she was still in the same bewilderment of mind, or rather the same ecstasy of feeling. Her thoughts had almost ceased to hold communion with things of the world. And when she saw the pale violet tints of early dawn visible over the roofs of the palace, and vaguely revealing the outlines of the ivory crucifix which she held embraced, she rose from the ground with a new-born strength, kissed the feet of the divine martyr, descended the staircase leading from the room, and wrapped herself from head to foot in a mantle as she went along. She reached the wicket at the very moment the guard of the musketeers opened the gate to admit the first relief-guard belonging to one of the Swiss regiments. And then, gliding behind the soldiers, she reached the street before the officer in command of the patrol had even thought of asking who the young girl was who was making her escape from the palace at so early an hour.