Chapter 26

The Flight.

La Valliere followed the patrol as it left the courtyard. The patrol bent its steps towards the right, by the Rue St. Honore, and mechanically La Valliere turned to the left. Her resolution was taken - her determination fixed; she wished to betake herself to the convent of the Carmelites at Chaillot, the superior of which enjoyed a reputation for severity which made the worldly-minded people of the court tremble. La Valliere had never seen Paris, she had never gone out on foot, and so would have been unable to find her way even had she been in a calmer frame of mind than was then the case; and this may explain why she ascended, instead of descending, the Rue St. Honore. Her only thought was to get away from the Palais Royal, and this she was doing; she had heard it said that Chaillot looked out upon the Seine, and she accordingly directed her steps towards the Seine. She took the Rue de Coq, and not being able to cross the Louvre, bore towards the church of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, proceeding along the site of the colonnade which was subsequently built there by Perrault. In a very short time she reached the quays. Her steps were rapid and agitated; she scarcely felt the weakness which reminded her of having sprained her foot when very young, and which obliged her to limp slightly. At any other hour in the day her countenance would have awakened the suspicions of the least clear-sighted, attracted the attention of the most indifferent. But at half-past two in the morning, the streets of Paris are almost, if not quite, deserted, and scarcely is any one to be seen but the hard-working artisan

on his way to earn his daily bread or the roistering idlers of the streets, who are returning to their homes after a night of riot and debauchery; for the former the day was beginning, and for the latter it was just closing. La Valliere was afraid of both faces, in which her ignorance of Parisian types did not permit her to distinguish the type of probity from that of dishonesty. The appearance of misery alarmed her, and all she met seemed either vile or miserable. Her dress, which was the same she had worn during the previous evening, was elegant even in its careless disorder; for it was the one in which she had presented herself to the queen-mother; and, moreover, when she drew aside the mantle which covered her face, in order to enable her to see the way she was going, her pallor and her beautiful eyes spoke an unknown language to the men she met, and, unconsciously, the poor fugitive seemed to invite the brutal remarks of the one class, or to appeal to the compassion of the other. La Valliere still walked on in the same way, breathless and hurried, until she reached the top of the Place de Greve. She stopped from time to time, placed her hand upon her heart, leaned against a wall until she could breathe freely again, and then continued on her course more rapidly than before. On reaching the Place de Greve La Valliere suddenly came upon a group of three drunken men, reeling and staggering along, who were just leaving a boat which they had made fast to the quay; the boat was freighted with wines, and it was apparent that they had done ample justice to the merchandise. They were celebrating their convivial exploits in three different keys, when suddenly, as they reached the end of the railing leading down to the quay, they found an obstacle in their path, in the shape of this young girl. La Valliere stopped; while they,

on their part, at the appearance of the young girl dressed in court costume, also halted, and seizing each other by the hand, they surrounded La Valliere, singing, -

"Oh! all ye weary wights, who mope alone,
Come drink, and sing and laugh, round Venus' throne."

La Valliere at once understood that the men were insulting her, and wished to prevent her passing; she tried to do so several times, but her efforts were useless. Her limbs failed her; she felt she was on the point of falling, and uttered a cry of terror. At the same moment the circle which surrounded her was suddenly broken through in a most violent manner. One of her insulters was knocked to the left, another fell rolling over and over to the right, close to the water's edge, while the third could hardly keep his feet. An officer of the musketeers stood face to face with the young girl, with threatening brow and hand raised to carry out his threat. The drunken fellows, at sight of the uniform, made their escape with what speed their staggering limbs could lend them, all the more eagerly for the proof of strength which the wearer of the uniform had just afforded them.

"Is it possible," exclaimed the musketeer, "that it can be Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

La Valliere, bewildered by what had just happened, and confounded by hearing her name pronounced, looked up and recognized D'Artagnan. "Oh,

M. d'Artagnan! it is indeed I;" and at the same moment she seized his arm. "You will protect me, will you not?" she added, in a tone of entreaty.

"Most certainly I will protect you; but, in Heaven's name, where are you going at this hour?"

"I am going to Chaillot."

"You are going to Chaillot by way of La Rapee! why, mademoiselle, you are turning your back upon it."

"In that case, monsieur, be kind enough to put me in the right way, and to go with me a short distance."

"Most willingly."

"But how does it happen that I have found you here? By what merciful intervention were you sent to my assistance? I almost seem to be dreaming, or to be losing my senses."

"I happened to be here, mademoiselle, because I have a house in the Place de Greve, at the sign of the Notre-Dame, the rent of which I went to receive yesterday, and where I, in fact, passed the night. And I also wished to be at the palace early, for the purposes of inspecting my posts."

"Thank you," said La Valliere.

"That is what _I_ was doing," said D'Artagnan to himself; "but what is _she_ doing, and why is she going to Chaillot at such an hour?" And he offered her his arm, which she took, and began to walk with increased precipitation, which ill-concealed, however, her weakness. D'Artagnan perceived it, and proposed to La Valliere that she should take a little rest, which she refused.

"You are ignorant, perhaps, where Chaillot is?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Quite so."

"It is a great distance."

"That matters very little."

"It is at least a league."

"I can walk it."

D'Artagnan did not reply; he could tell, merely by the tone of a voice, when a resolution was real or not. He rather bore along rather than accompanied La Valliere, until they perceived the elevated ground of Chaillot.

"What house are you going to, mademoiselle?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"To the Carmelites, monsieur."

"To the Carmelites?" repeated D'Artagnan, in amazement.

"Yes; and since Heaven has directed you towards me to give me your support on my road, accept both my thanks and my adieux."

"To the Carmelites! Your adieux! Are you going to become a nun?" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Yes, monsieur."

"What, you!!!" There was in this "you," which we have marked by three notes of exclamation in order to render it as expressive as possible, - there was, we repeat, in this "you" a complete poem; it recalled to La Valliere her old recollections of Blois, and her new recollections of Fontainebleau; it said to her, "_You_, who might be happy with Raoul; _you_, who might be powerful with Louis; _you_ about to become a nun!"

"Yes, monsieur," she said, "I am going to devote myself to the service of Heaven; and to renounce the world entirely."

"But are you not mistaken with regard to your vocation, - are you not

mistaken in supposing it to be the will of Heaven?"

"No, since Heaven has been pleased to throw you in my way. Had it not been for you, I should certainly have sunk from fatigue on the road, and since Heaven, I repeat, has thrown you in my way, it is because it has willed that I should carry out my intention."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, doubtingly, "that is a rather subtle distinction, I think."

"Whatever it may be," returned the young girl, "I have acquainted you with the steps I have taken, and with my fixed resolution. And, now, I have one last favor to ask of you, even while I return you my thanks. The king is entirely ignorant of my flight from the Palais Royal, and is ignorant also of what I am about to do."

"The king ignorant, you say!" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Take care, mademoiselle; you are not aware of what you are doing. No one ought to do anything with which the king is unacquainted, especially those who belong to the court."

"I no longer belong to the court, monsieur."

D'Artagnan looked at the young girl with increasing astonishment.

"Do not be uneasy, monsieur," she continued: "I have well calculated

everything; and were it not so, it would now be too late to reconsider my resolution, - all is decided."

"Well, mademoiselle, what do you wish me to do?"

"In the name of that sympathy which misfortune inspires, by your generous feeling, and by your honor as a gentleman, I entreat you to promise me one thing."

"Name it."

"Swear to me, Monsieur d'Artagnan, that you will not tell the king that you have seen me, and that I am at the Carmelites."

"I will not swear that," said D'Artagnan, shaking his head.

"Why?"

"Because I know the king, I know you, I know myself even, nay, the whole human race, too well; no, no, I will not swear that!"

"In that case," cried La Valliere, with an energy of which one would hardly have thought her capable, "instead of the blessing which I should have implored for you until my dying day, I will invoke a curse, for you are rendering me the most miserable creature that ever lived."

We have already observed that D'Artagnan could easily recognize the accents of truth and sincerity, and he could not resist this last appeal. He saw by her face how bitterly she suffered from a feeling of degradation, he remarked her trembling limbs, how her whole slight and delicate frame was violently agitated by some internal struggle, and clearly perceived that resistance might be fatal. "I will do as you wish, then," he said. "Be satisfied, mademoiselle, I will say nothing to the king."

"Oh! thanks, thanks," exclaimed La Valliere, "you are the most generous man breathing."

And in her extreme delight she seized hold of D'Artagnan's hands and pressed them between her own. D'Artagnan, who felt himself quite overcome, said: "This is touching, upon my word; she begins where others leave off."

And La Valliere, who, in the bitterness of her distress, had sunk upon the ground, rose and walked towards the convent of the Carmelites, which could now, in the dawning light, be perceived just before them. D'Artagnan followed her at a distance. The entrance-door was half-open; she glided in like a shadow, and thanking D'Artagnan by a parting gesture, disappeared from his sight. When D'Artagnan found himself quite alone, he reflected very profoundly upon what had just taken place. "Upon my word," he said, "this looks very much like what is called a false position. To keep such a secret as that, is to keep a burning coal

in one's breeches-pocket, and trust that it may not burn the stuff. And yet, not to keep it when I have sworn to do so is dishonorable. It generally happens that some bright idea or other occurs to me as I am going along; but I am very much mistaken if I shall not, now, have to go a long way in order to find the solution of this affair. Yes, but which way to go? Oh! towards Paris, of course; that is the best way, after all. Only one must make haste, and in order to make haste four legs are better than two, and I, unhappily, only have two. 'A horse, a horse,' as I heard them say at the theatre in London, 'my kingdom for a horse!' And now I think of it, it need not cost me so much as that, for at the Barriere de la Conference there is a guard of musketeers, and instead of the one horse I need, I shall find ten there."

So, in pursuance of this resolution, which he adopted with his usual rapidity, D'Artagnan immediately turned his back upon the heights of Chaillot, reached the guard-house, took the fastest horse he could find there, and was at the palace in less than ten minutes. It was striking five as he reached the Palais Royal. The king, he was told, had gone to bed at his usual hour, having been long engaged with M. Colbert, and, in all probability, was still sound asleep. "Come," said D'Artagnan, "she spoke the truth; the king is ignorant of everything; if he only knew one-half of what has happened, the Palais Royal by this time would be turned upside down."