

Chapter 29

Chaillot.

Although they had not been summoned, Manicamp and Malicorne had followed the king and D'Artagnan. They were both exceedingly intelligent men; except that Malicorne was too precipitate, owing to ambition, while Manicamp was frequently too tardy, owing to indolence. On this occasion, however, they arrived at precisely the proper moment. Five horses were in readiness. Two were seized upon by the king and D'Artagnan, two others by Manicamp and Malicorne, while a groom belonging to the stables mounted the fifth. The cavalcade set off at a gallop. D'Artagnan had been very careful in his selection of the horses; they were the very animals for distressed lovers - horses which did not simply run, but flew. Within ten minutes after their departure, the cavalcade, amidst a cloud of dust, arrived at Chaillot. The king literally threw himself off his horse; but notwithstanding the rapidity with which he accomplished this maneuver, he found D'Artagnan already holding his stirrup. With a sign of acknowledgement to the musketeer, he threw the bridle to the groom, and darted into the vestibule, violently pushed open the door, and entered the reception-room. Manicamp, Malicorne, and the groom remained outside, D'Artagnan alone following him. When he entered the reception-room, the first object which met his gaze was Louise herself, not simply on her knees, but lying at the foot of a large stone crucifix. The young girl was stretched upon the damp flag-stones, scarcely visible in the gloom of the apartment, which was lighted only by means of a narrow

window, protected by bars and completely shaded by creeping plants. When the king saw her in this state, he thought she was dead, and uttered a loud cry, which made D'Artagnan hurry into the room. The king had already passed one of his arms round her body, and D'Artagnan assisted him in raising the poor girl, whom the torpor of death seemed already to have taken possession of. D'Artagnan seized hold of the alarm-bell and rang with all his might. The Carmelite sisters immediately hastened at the summons, and uttered loud exclamations of alarm and indignation at the sight of the two men holding a woman in their arms. The superior also hurried to the scene of action, but far more a creature of the world than any of the female members of the court, notwithstanding her austerity of manners, she recognized the king at the first glance, by the respect which those present exhibited for him, as well as by the imperious and authoritative way in which he had thrown the whole establishment into confusion. As soon as she saw the king, she retired to her own apartments, in order to avoid compromising her dignity. But by one of the nuns she sent various cordials, Hungary water, etc., etc., and ordered that all the doors should immediately be closed, a command which was just in time, for the king's distress was fast becoming of a most clamorous and despairing character. He had almost decided to send for his own physician, when La Valliere exhibited signs of returning animation. The first object which met her gaze, as she opened her eyes, was the king at her feet; in all probability she did not recognize him, for she uttered a deep sigh full of anguish and distress. Louis fixed his eyes devouringly upon her face; and when, in the course of a few moments, she recognized Louis, she endeavored to tear herself from his

embrace.

"Oh, heavens!" she murmured, "is not the sacrifice yet made?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the king, "and it shall not be made, I swear."

Notwithstanding her weakness and utter despair, she rose from the ground, saying, "It must be made, however; it must be; so do not stay me in my purpose."

"I leave you to sacrifice yourself! I! never, never!" exclaimed the king.

"Well," murmured D'Artagnan, "I may as well go now. As soon as they begin to speak, we may as well prevent there being any listeners." And he quitted the room, leaving the lovers alone.

"Sire," continued La Valliere, "not another word, I implore you. Do not destroy the only future I can hope for - my salvation; do not destroy the glory and brightness of your own future for a mere caprice."

"A caprice?" cried the king.

"Oh, sire! it is now, only, that I can see clearly into your heart."

"You, Louise, what mean you?"

"An inexplicable impulse, foolish and unreasonable in its nature, may ephemerally appear to offer a sufficient excuse for your conduct; but there are duties imposed upon you which are incompatible with your regard for a poor girl such as I am. So, forget me."

"I forget you!"

"You have already done so, once."

"Rather would I die."

"You cannot love one whose peace of mind you hold so lightly, and whom you so cruelly abandoned, last night, to the bitterness of death."

"What can you mean? Explain yourself, Louise."

"What did you ask me yesterday morning? To love you. What did you promise me in return? Never to let midnight pass without offering me an opportunity of reconciliation, if, by any chance, your anger should be roused against me."

"Oh! forgive me, Louise, forgive me! I was mad from jealousy."

"Jealousy is a sentiment unworthy of a king - a man. You may become jealous again, and will end by killing me. Be merciful, then, and leave me now to die."

"Another word, mademoiselle, in that strain, and you will see me expire at your feet."

"No, no, sire, I am better acquainted with my own demerits; and believe me, that to sacrifice yourself for one whom all despise, would be needless."

"Give me the names of those you have cause to complain of."

"I have no complaints, sire, to prefer against any one; no one but myself to accuse. Farewell, sire; you are compromising yourself in speaking to me in such a manner."

"Oh! be careful, Louise, in what you say; for you are reducing me to the darkness of despair."

"Oh! sire, sire, leave me at least the protection of Heaven, I implore you."

"No, no; Heaven itself shall not tear you from me."

"Save me, then," cried the poor girl, "from those determined and pitiless enemies who are thirsting to annihilate my life and honor too. If you have courage enough to love me, show at least that you have power enough to defend me. But no; she whom you say you love, others insult and mock,

and drive shamelessly away." And the gentle-hearted girl, forced, by her own bitter distress to accuse others, wrung her hands in an uncontrollable agony of tears.

"You have been driven away!" exclaimed the king. "This is the second time I have heard that said."

"I have been driven away with shame and ignominy, sire. You see, then, that I have no other protector but Heaven, no consolation but prayer, and this cloister is my only refuge."

"My palace, my whole court, shall be your park of peace. Oh! fear nothing further now, Louise; those - be they men or women - who yesterday drove you away, shall to-morrow tremble before you - to-morrow, do I say? nay, this very day I have already shown my displeasure - have already threatened. It is in my power, even now, to hurl the thunderbolt I have hitherto withheld. Louise, Louise, you shall be bitterly revenged; tears of blood shall repay you for the tears you have shed. Give me only the names of your enemies."

"Never, never."

"How can I show any anger, then?"

"Sire, those upon whom your anger would be prepared to fall, would force you to draw back your hand upraised to punish."

"Oh! you do not know me," cried the king, exasperated. "Rather than draw back, I would sacrifice my kingdom, and would abjure my family. Yes, I would strike until this arm had utterly destroyed all those who had ventured to make themselves the enemies of the gentlest and best of creatures." And, as he said these words, Louis struck his fist violently against the oaken wainscoting with a force which alarmed La Valliere; for his anger, owing to his unbounded power, had something imposing and threatening in it, like the lightning, which may at any time prove deadly. She, who thought that her own sufferings could not be surpassed, was overwhelmed by a suffering which revealed itself by menace and by violence.

"Sire," she said, "for the last time I implore you to leave me; already do I feel strengthened by the calm seclusion of this asylum; and the protection of Heaven has reassured me; for all the pretty human meanness of this world are forgotten beneath the Divine protection. Once more, then, sire, and for the last time, I again implore you to leave me."

"Confess, rather," cried Louis, "that you have never loved me; admit that my humility and my repentance are flattering to your pride, but that my distress affects you not; that the king of this wide realm is no longer regarded as a lover whose tenderness of devotion is capable of working out your happiness, but as a despot whose caprice has crushed your very heart beneath his iron heel. Do not say you are seeking Heaven, say rather you are fleeing from the king."

Louise's heart was wrung within her, as she listened to his passionate utterance, which made the fever of hope course once more through her every vein.

"But did you not hear me say that I have been driven away, scorned, despised?"

"I will make you the most respected, and most adored, and the most envied of my whole court."

"Prove to me that you have not ceased to love me."

"In what way?"

"By leaving me."

"I will prove it to you by never leaving you again."

"But do you imagine, sire, that I shall allow that; do you imagine that I will let you come to an open rupture with every member of your family; do you imagine that, for my sake, you could abandon mother, wife and sister?"

"Ah! you have named them, then, at last; it is they, then, who have wrought this grievous injury? By the heaven above us, then, upon them shall my anger fall."

"That is the reason why the future terrifies me, why I refuse everything, why I do not wish you to revenge me. Tears enough have already been shed, sufficient sorrow and affliction have already been occasioned. I, at least, will never be the cause of sorrow, or affliction, or distress to whomsoever it may be, for I have mourned and suffered, and wept too much myself."

"And do you count my sufferings, my tears, as nothing?"

"In Heaven's name, sire, do not speak to me in that manner. I need all my courage to enable me to accomplish the sacrifice."

"Louise, Louise, I implore you! whatever you desire, whatever you command, whether vengeance or forgiveness, your slightest wish shall be obeyed, but do not abandon me."

"Alas! sire, we must part."

"You do not love me, then!"

"Heaven knows I do!"

"It is false, Louise; it is false."

"Oh! sire, if I did not love you, I should let you do what you please; I

should let you revenge me, in return for the insult which has been inflicted on me; I should accept the brilliant triumph to my pride which you propose; and yet, you cannot deny that I reject even the sweet compensation which your affection affords, that affection which for me is life itself, for I wished to die when I thought that you loved me no longer."

"Yes, yes; I now know, I now perceive it; you are the sweetest, best, and purest of women. There is no one so worthy as yourself, not alone of my respect and devotion, but also of the respect and devotion of all who surround me; and therefore no one shall be loved like yourself; no one shall ever possess the influence over me that you wield. You wish me to be calm, to forgive? - be it so, you shall find me perfectly unmoved. You wish to reign by gentleness and clemency? - I will be clement and gentle. Dictate for me the conduct you wish me to adopt, and I will obey blindly."

"In Heaven's name, no, sire; what am I, a poor girl, to dictate to so great a monarch as yourself?"

"You are my life, the very spirit and principle of my being. Is it not the spirit that rules the body?"

"You love me, then, sire?"

"On my knees, yes; with my hands upraised to you, yes; with all the

strength and power of my being, yes; I love you so deeply, that I would lay down my life for you, gladly, at your merest wish."

"Oh! sire, now I know you love me, I have nothing to wish for in the world. Give me your hand, sire; and then, farewell! I have enjoyed in this life all the happiness I was ever meant for."

"Oh! no, no! your happiness is not a happiness of yesterday, it is of to-day, of to-morrow, ever enduring. The future is yours, everything which is mine is yours, too. Away with these ideas of separation, away with these gloomy, despairing thoughts. You will live for me, as I will live for you, Louise." And he threw himself at her feet, embracing her knees with the wildest transports of joy and gratitude.

"Oh! sire, sire! all that is but a wild dream."

"Why, a wild dream?"

"Because I cannot return to the court. Exiled, how can I see you again? Would it not be far better to bury myself in a cloister for the rest of my life, with the rich consolation that your affection gives me, with the pulses of your heart beating for me, and your latest confession of attachment still ringing in my ears?"

"Exiled, you!" exclaimed Louis XIV., "and who dares to exile, let me ask, when I recall?"

"Oh! sire, something which is greater than and superior to the kings even - the world and public opinion. Reflect for a moment; you cannot love a woman who has been ignominiously driven away - love one whom your mother has stained with suspicions; one whom your sister has threatened with disgrace; such a woman, indeed, would be unworthy of you."

"Unworthy! one who belongs to me?"

"Yes, sire, precisely on that account; from the very moment she belongs to you, the character of your mistress renders her unworthy."

"You are right, Louise; every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours. Very well, you shall not be exiled."

"Ah! from the tone in which you speak, you have not heard Madame, that is very clear."

"I will appeal from her to my mother."

"Again, sire, you have not seen your mother."

"She, too! - my poor Louise! every one's hand, then, is against you."

"Yes, yes, poor Louise, who was already bending beneath the fury of the

storm, when you arrived and crushed her beneath the weight of your displeasure."

"Oh! forgive me."

"You will not, I know, be able to make either of them yield; believe me, the evil cannot be repaired, for I will not allow you to use violence, or to exercise your authority."

"Very well, Louise, to prove to you how fondly I love you, I will do one thing, I will see Madame; I will make her revoke her sentence, I will compel her to do so."

"Compel? Oh! no, no!"

"True; you are right. I will bend her."

Louise shook her head.

"I will entreat her, if it be necessary," said Louis. "Will you believe in my affection after that?"

Louise drew herself up. "Oh, never, never shall you humiliate yourself on my account; sooner, a thousand times, would I die."

Louis reflected; his features assumed a dark expression. "I will love

you as much as you have loved; I will suffer as keenly as you have suffered; this shall be my expiation in your eyes. Come, mademoiselle, put aside these paltry considerations; let us show ourselves as great as our sufferings, as strong as our affection for each other." And, as he said this, he took her in his arms, and encircled her waist with both his hands, saying, "My own love! my own dearest and best beloved, follow me."

She made a final effort, in which she concentrated, no longer all of her firmness of will, for that had long since been overcome, but all her physical strength. "No!" she replied, weakly, "no! no! I should die from shame."

"No! you shall return like a queen. No one knows of your having left – except, indeed, D'Artagnan."

"He has betrayed me, then?"

"In what way?"

"He promised faithfully - "

"I promised not to say anything to the king," said D'Artagnan, putting his head through the half-opened door, "and I kept my word; I was speaking to M. de Saint-Aignan, and it was not my fault if the king overheard me; was it, sire?"

"It is quite true," said the king; "forgive him."

La Valliere smiled, and held out her small white hand to the musketeer.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," said the king, "be good enough to see if you can find a carriage for Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Sire," said the captain, "the carriage is waiting at the gate."

"You are a magic mould of forethought," exclaimed the king.

"You have taken a long time to find it out," muttered D'Artagnan, notwithstanding he was flattered by the praise bestowed upon him.

La Valliere was overcome: after a little further hesitation, she allowed herself to be led away, half fainting, by her royal lover. But, as she was on the point of leaving the room, she tore herself from the king's grasp, and returned to the stone crucifix, which she kissed, saying, "Oh, Heaven! it was thou who drewest me hither! thou, who has rejected me; but thy grace is infinite. Whenever I shall again return, forget that I have ever separated myself from thee, for, when I return it will be - never to leave thee again."

The king could not restrain his emotion, and D'Artagnan, even, was overcome. Louis led the young girl away, lifted her into the carriage, and directed D'Artagnan to seat himself beside her, while he, mounting

his horse, spurred violently towards the Palais Royal, where, immediately on his arrival, he sent to request an audience of Madame.