

Chapter 52

VENTRE ST. GRIS.

Left alone, the duke, knowing he had at least an hour before him, drew out his ladder and carefully examined the fastenings.

"The ladder is good," said he, at length, "and will not break."

Then he unrolled it all, and counted thirty-eight rounds of fifteen inches each.

"The length is sufficient," said he, "there is nothing to fear on that point. Ah! but if it were some of those cursed minions who sent me to the ladder? If I attach it to the balcony they will let me do it, and while I am descending they will cut the cords. But, no; they could not be foolish enough to think I would fly without barricading the door, and I should have time to fly before they could force it. But what person in the world, except my sister herself, could know of a ladder hidden in her dressing-room? What friend of mine can it be?"

Suddenly an idea struck him, and he cried, "Bussy!"

Indeed, Bussy, whom so many ladies adored, Bussy was a hero to the Queen of Navarre, and his only true friend--was it Bussy? Everything made him think so. The duke, of course, did not know all his motives for being angry with him, for he did not know his love for Diana, and believed him to be too noble to think of resentment when his master was a prisoner. He approached the window again, and fancied he could see in the fog the indistinct forms of three horses and two men by the river. Two men. These must be Bussy and Rémy. He then looked through the keyhole, and saw his four guardians; two were asleep, and two had inherited Chicot's chessboard and were playing. He extinguished his light.

Then he opened his window, and looked over the balcony; the gulf below him looked dreadful in the darkness, and he drew back. But air and liberty have an attraction so irresistible to a prisoner, that François, on withdrawing from the window, felt as if he were being stifled, and for an instant something like disgust of life and indifference to death passed through his mind. He fancied he was growing courageous, and, profiting by this moment of excitement, he seized the ladder, fixed it to the balcony, then barricaded the door as well as he could, and returned to the window. The darkness was now great, and the first growlings of the storm began to make themselves heard; a great cloud with silver fringes extended itself like a recumbent elephant from one side to the other of the river. A flash of lightning broke the immense cloud for a moment, and the prince fancied that he saw below him in the fosse the same figures he had imagined before. A horse neighed; there was no more doubt--he was waited for.

He shook the ladder to see if it was firm, then he put his leg over the balustrade and placed his foot on the first step. Nothing can describe the anguish of the prisoner at this moment, placed between a frail silk cord on the one hand and his brother's cruel menaces on the other. But as he stood there he felt the ladder stiffened; some one held it. Was it a friend or an enemy? Were they open arms or armed ones which waited for him? An irresistible terror seized him; he still held the balcony with his left hand, and made a movement to remount, when a very slight pull at the ladder came to him like a solicitation. He took courage, and tried the second step. The ladder was held as firm as a rock, and he found a steady support for his foot. He descended rapidly, almost gliding down, when all at once, instead of touching the earth, which he knew to be near, he felt himself seized in the arms of a man who whispered, "You are saved." Then he was carried along the fosse till they came to the end, when another man seized him by the collar and drew him up, and after having aided his companion in the same way, they ran to the river, where stood the horses. The prince knew he was at, the mercy of his saviours, so he jumped at once on a horse, and his companions did the same. The same voice now said, "Quick!" And they set off at a gallop.

"All goes well at present," thought the prince, "let us hope it will end so. Thanks, my brave Bussy," said he to his companion on the right, who was entirely covered with a large cloak.

"Quick!" replied the other.

They arrived thus at the great ditch of the Bastille, which they crossed on a bridge improvised by the Leaguers the night before. The three cavaliers rode towards Charenton, when all at once the man on the right entered the forest of Vincennes, saying only, "Come." The prince's horse neighed, and several others answered from the depths of the forest. François would have stopped if he could, for he feared they were taking him to an ambush, but it was too late, and in a few minutes he found himself in a small open space, where eight or ten men on horseback were drawn up.

"Oh! oh!" said the prince, "what does this mean, monsieur?"

"Ventre St. Gris! it means that we are saved."

"You! Henri!" cried the duke, stupefied, "you! my liberator?"

"Does that astonish you? Are we not related, Agrippa?" continued he, looking round for his companion.

"Here I am," said D'Aubigné.

"Are there two fresh horses, with which we can go a dozen leagues without stopping?"

"But where are you taking me, my cousin?"

"Where you like, only be quick, for the King of France has more horses than I have, and is rich enough to kill a dozen if he wishes to catch us."

"Really, then, I am free to go where I like?"

"Certainly, I wait your orders."

"Well, then, to Angers."

"To Angers; so be it, there you are at home."

"But you?"

"I! when we are in sight of Angers I shall leave you, and ride on to Navarre, where my good Margot expects me, and must be much ennuyée at my absence."

"But no one knew you were here?"

"I came to sell three diamonds of my wife's."

"Ah! very well."

"And also to know if this League was really going to ruin me."

"You see there is nothing in it."

"Thanks to you, no."

"How! thanks to me?"

"Certainly. If, instead of refusing to be chief of the League, when you knew it was directed against me, you had accepted, I was ruined. Therefore, when I heard that the king had punished your refusal with imprisonment, I swore to release you, and I have done so."

"Always so simple-minded," thought François, "really, it is easy to deceive him."

"Now for Anjou," thought the king. "Ah! M. de Guise, I send you a companion you do not want."