

## Chapter 53

### THE FRIENDS.

While Paris was in this ferment, Madame de Monsoreau, escorted by her father and two servants, pursued their way to Méridor. She began to enjoy her liberty, precious to those who have suffered. The azure of the sky, compared to that which hung always menacingly over the black towers of the Bastile, the trees already green, all appeared to her fresh and young, beautiful and new, as if she had really come out of the tomb where her father had believed her. He, the old baron, had grown young again. We will not attempt to describe their long journey, free from incidents. Several times the baron said to Diana,--

"Do not fear, my daughter."

"Fear what?"

"Were you not looking if M. de Monsoreau was following us?"

"Yes, it was true, I did look," replied she, with a sigh and another glance behind.

At last, on the eighth day, they reached the château of Méridor, and were received by Madame de St. Luc and her husband. Then began for these four people one of those existences of which every man has dreamed in reading Virgil or Theocritus. The baron and St. Luc hunted from morning till evening; you might have seen troops of dogs rushing from the hills in pursuit of some hare or fox, and startling Diana and Jeanne, as they sat side by side on the moss, under the shade of the trees.

"Recount to me," said Jeanne, "all that happened to you in the tomb, for you were dead to us. See, the hawthorn is shedding on us its last flowers, and

the elders send out their perfume. Not a breath in the air, not a human being near us; recount, little sister."

"What can I say?"

"Tell me, are you happy? That beautiful eye often swimming in tears, the paleness of your cheeks, that mouth which tries a smile which it never finishes--Diana, you must have many things to tell me."

"No, nothing."

"You are, then, happy with M. de Monsoreau?"

Diana shuddered.

"You see!" said Jeanne.

"With M. de Monsoreau! Why did you pronounce that name? why do you evoke that phantom in the midst of our woods, our flowers, our happiness?"

"You told me, I think," said Jeanne, "that M. de Bussy showed much interest in you."

Diana reddened, even to her round pretty ears.

"He is a charming creature," continued Jeanne, kissing Diana.

"It is folly," said Diana; "M. de Bussy thinks no more of Diana de Méridor."

"That is possible; but I believe he pleases Diana de Monsoreau a little."

"Do not say that."

"Does it displease you?"

"I tell you he thinks no more of me; and he does well--oh, I was cowardly."

"What do you say?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Now, Diana, do not cry, do not accuse yourself. You cowardly! you, my heroine! you were constrained."

"I believed it; I saw dangers, gulfs under my feet. Now, Jeanne, these dangers seem to me chimerical, these gulfs as if a child could cross them. I was cowardly, I tell you; oh, I had no time to reflect."

"You speak in enigmas."

"No," cried Diana, rising, "it was not my fault, it was his. The Duc d'Anjou was against him; but when one wishes a thing, when one loves, neither prince nor master should keep you back. See, Jeanne, if I loved----"

"Be calm, dear friend."

"I tell you, we were cowardly."

"'We!' of whom do you speak? That 'we' is eloquent, my dearest Diana."

"I mean my father and I; you did not think anything else, did you? My father is a nobleman--he might have spoken to the king; I am proud, and do not fear a man when I hate him. But he did not love me."

"You lie to yourself! you know the contrary, little hypocrite!"

"You may believe in love, Jeanne, you, whom M. de St. Luc married in spite of the king; you, whom he carried away from Paris; you, who pay him by your caresses for proscription and exile."

"And he thinks himself richly repaid."

"But I--reflect a little, do not be egotistical--I, whom that fiery young man pretended to love--I, who fixed the regards of that invincible Bussy, he who fears no one--I was alone with him in the cloister of l'Egyptienne--we were alone; but for Gertrude and Rémy, our accomplices, he could have carried me off. At that moment I saw him suffering because of me; I saw his eyes languishing, his lips pale and parched with fever. If he had asked me to die to restore the brightness to his eyes, and the freshness to his lips, I should have died. Well, I went away, and he never tried to detain me. Wait still. He knew that I was leaving Paris, that I was returning to Méridor; he knew that M. de Monsoreau--I blush as I tell it--was only my husband in name; he knew that I traveled alone; and along the road, dear Jeanne, I kept turning, thinking I heard the gallop of his horse behind us. But no, it was only the echo of my own. I tell you he does not think of me. I am not worth a journey to Anjou while there are so many beautiful women at the court of France, whose smiles are worth a hundred confessions from the provincial, buried at Méridor. Do you understand now? Am I forgotten, despised----"

She had not finished when the foliage of the oak rustled, a quantity of mortar and moss fell from the old wall, and a man threw himself at the feet of Diana, who uttered an affrighted cry.

Jeanne ran away--she recognized him.

"Here I am!" cried Bussy, kissing the dress of Diana.

She too recognized him, and, overcome by this unexpected happiness, fell unconscious into the arms of him whom she had just accused of indifference.