

Chapter 91

THE ASSASSINATION.

Bussy, himself without disquietude or hesitation, had been received by Diana without fear, for she believed herself sure of the absence of M. de Monsoreau. Never had this beautiful woman been more beautiful, nor Bussy more happy. She was moved, however, by fears for the morrow's combat, now so near, and she repeated to him, again and again, the anxiety she felt about it, and questioned him as to the arrangements he had made for flight. To conquer was not all; there was afterwards the king's anger to avoid, for it was not probable that he would ever pardon the death or defeat of his favorites.

"And then," said she, "are you not acknowledged to be the bravest man in France? Why make it a point of honor to augment your glory? You are already superior to other men, and you do not wish to please any other woman but me, Louis. Therefore, guard your life, or rather--for I think there is not a man in France capable of killing you, Louis--I should say, take care of wounds, for you may be wounded. Indeed, it was through a wound received in fighting with these same men, that I first made your acquaintance."

"Make yourself easy," said Bussy, smiling; "I will take care of my face--I shall not be disfigured."

"Oh, take care of yourself altogether. Think of the grief you would experience if you saw me brought home wounded and bleeding, and that I should feel the same grief on seeing your blood. Be prudent, my too courageous hero--that is all I ask. Act like the Roman of whom you read to me the other day: let your friends fight, aid the one who needs it most, but if three men--if two men attack you, fly; you can turn, like Horatius, and kill them one after another."

"Yes, my dear Diana."

"Oh, you reply without hearing me, Louis; you look at me, and do not listen."

"But I see you, and you are beautiful."

"Do not think of my beauty just now! Mon Dieu! it is your life I am speaking of. Stay, I will tell you something that will make you more prudent--I shall have the courage to witness this duel."

"You!"

"I shall be there."

"Impossible, Diana!"

"No; listen. There is, in the room next to this, a window looking into a little court, but with a side-view of the Tournelles."

"Yes, I remember--the window from which I threw crumbs to the birds the other day."

"From there I can have a view of the ground; therefore, above all things, take care to stand so that I can see you; you will know that I am there, but do not look at me, lest your enemy should profit by it."

"And kill me, while I had my eyes fixed upon you. If I had to choose my death, Diana, that is the one I should prefer."

"Yes; but now you are not to die, but live."

"And I will live; therefore tranquilize yourself, Diana. Besides, I am well seconded--you do not know my friends; Antragues uses his sword as well as I do, Ribeirac is so steady on the ground that his eyes and his arms alone seem to be alive, and Livarot is as active as a tiger. Believe me, Diana, I wish there were more danger, for there would be more honor."

"Well, I believe you, and I smile and hope; but listen, and promise to obey me."

"Yes, if you do not tell me to leave."

"It is just what I am about to do. I appeal to your reason."

"Then you should not have made me mad."

"No nonsense, but obedience--that is the way to prove your love."

"Order, then."

"Dear friend, you want a long sleep; go home."

"Not already."

"Yes, I am going to pray for you."

"Pray now, then."

As he spoke, a pane of the window flew into pieces, then the window itself, and three armed men appeared on the balcony while a fourth was climbing over. This one had his face covered with a mask, and held in his right hand a sword, and in his left a pistol.

Bussy remained paralyzed for a moment by the dreadful cry uttered by Diana at this sight. The masked man made a sign, and the three others advanced. Bussy put Diana back, and drew his sword.

"Come, my brave fellows!" said a sepulchral voice from under the mask; "he is already half-dead with fear."

"You are wrong," said Bussy; "I never feel fear."

Diana drew near him.

"Go back, Diana," said he. But she threw herself on his neck. "You will get me killed," said he; and she drew back.

"Ah!" said the masked man, "it is M. de Bussy, and I would not believe it, fool that I was! Really, what a good and excellent friend! He learns that the husband is absent, and has left his wife alone, and fears she may be afraid, so he comes to keep her company, although on the eve of a duel. I repeat, he is a good and excellent friend!"

"Ah! it is you, M. de Monsoreau!" said Bussy; "throw off your mask."

"I will," said he, doing so.

Diana uttered another cry; the comte was as pale as a corpse, but he smiled like a demon.

"Let us finish, monsieur," said Bussy; "it was very well for Homer's heroes, who were demigods, to talk before they fought; but I am a man--attack me, or let me pass."

Monsoreau replied by a laugh which made Diana shudder, but raised Bussy's anger.

"Let me pass!" cried he.

"Oh, oh!"

"Then, draw and have done; I wish to go home and I live far off."

During this time two other men mounted into the balcony.

"Two and four make six," said Bussy, "where are the others?"

"Waiting at the door."

Diana fell on her knees, and in spite of her efforts Bussy heard her sobs.

"My dear comte," said he, "you know I am a man of honor."

"Yes, you are, and madame is a faithful wife."

"Good, monsieur; you are severe, but, perhaps, it is deserved; only as I have a prior engagement with four gentlemen, I beg to be allowed to retire to-night, and I pledge my word, you shall find me again, when and where you will."

Monsoreau shrugged his shoulders.

"I swear to you, monsieur," said Bussy, "that when I have satisfied MM. Quelus, Schomberg, D'Epernon, and Maugiron, I shall be at your service. If they kill me, your vengeance will be satisfied, and if not----"

Monsoreau turned to his men. "On, my brave fellows," said he.

"Oh!" said Bussy, "I was wrong; it is not a duel, but an assassination."

"Yes."

"We were each deceived with regard to the other; but remember, monsieur, that the Duc d'Anjou will avenge me."

"It was he who sent me."

Diana groaned.

Instantaneously Bussy overturned the prie-Dieu, drew a table towards him, and threw a chair over all, so that in a second he had formed a kind of rampart between himself and his enemies. This movement had been so rapid, that the ball fired at him from the arquebuse only struck the prie-Dieu. Diana sobbed aloud. Bussy glanced at her, and then at his assailants, crying, "Come on, but take care, for my sword is sharp."

The men advanced, and one tried to seize the prie-Dieu, but before he reached it, Bussy's sword pierced his arm. The man uttered a cry, and fell back.

Bussy then heard rapid steps in the corridor, and thought he was surrounded. He flew to the door to lock it, but before he could reach it, it was opened, and two men rushed in.

"Ah! dear master!" cried a well-known voice, "are we in time?"

"Rémy!"

"And I?" cried a second voice, "it seems they are attempting assassination here."

"St. Luc!" cried Bussy, joyfully. "Ah! M. de Monsoreau, I think now you will do well to let us pass, for if you do not, we will pass over you."

"Three more men," cried Monsoreau. And they saw three new assailants appear on the balcony.

"They are an army," cried St. Luc.

"Oh! God protect him!" cried Diana.

"Wretch!" cried Monsoreau, and he advanced to strike her. Bussy saw the movement. Agile as a tiger, he bounded on him, and touched him in the throat; but the distance was too great, it was only a scratch. Five or six men rushed on Bussy, but one fell beneath the sword of St. Luc.

"Rémy!" cried Bussy, "carry away Diana."

Monsoreau uttered a yell and snatched a pistol from one of the men.

Rémy hesitated. "But you?" said he.

"Away! away! I confide her to you."

"Come, madame," said Rémy.

"Never! I will never leave him."

Rémy seized her in his arms.

"Bussy, help me! Bussy!" cried Diana. For any one who separated her from Bussy, seemed an enemy to her.

"Go," cried Bussy, "I will rejoin you."

At this moment Monsoreau fired, and Bussy saw Rémy totter, and then fall, dragging Diana with him. Bussy uttered a cry, and turned.

"It is nothing, master," said Rémy. "It was I who received the ball. She is safe."

As Bussy turned, three men threw themselves on him; St. Luc rushed forward, and one of them fell. The two others drew back.

"St. Luc," cried Bussy, "by her you love, save Diana."

"But you?"

"I am a man."

St. Luc rushed to Diana, seized her in his arms, and disappeared through the door.

"Here, my men, from the staircase," shouted Monsoreau.

"Ah! coward!" cried Bussy.

Monsoreau retreated behind his men. Bussy gave a back stroke and a thrust; with the first he cleft open a head, and with the second pierced a breast.

"That clears!" cried he.

"Fly, master!" cried Rémy.

"Diana must save herself first," murmured he.

"Take care," cried Rémy again, as four men rushed in through the door from the staircase. Bussy saw himself between two troops, but his only cry was, "Ah! Diana!"

Then, without losing a second, he rushed on the four men; and taken by surprise, two fell, one dead, one wounded.

Then, as Monsoreau advanced, he retreated again behind his rampart.

"Push the bolts, and turn the key," cried Monsoreau, "we have him now." During this time, by a great effort, Rémy had dragged himself before Bussy, and added his body to the rampart.

There was an instant's pause. Bussy looked around him. Seven men lay stretched on the ground, but nine remained. And seeing these nine swords, and hearing Monsoreau encouraging them, this brave man, who had never known fear, saw plainly before him the image of death, beckoning him with its gloomy smile.

"I may kill five more," thought he, "but the other four will kill me. I have strength for ten minutes' more combat; in that ten minutes let me do what man never did before."

And rushing forward, he gave three thrusts, and three times he pierced the leather of a shoulder-belt, or the buff of a jacket, and three times a stream of blood followed.

During this time he had parried twenty blows with his left arm, and his cloak, which he had wrapped round it, was hacked to pieces.

The men changed their tactics; seeing two of their number fall and one retire, they renounced the sword, and some tried to strike with the butt-ends of their muskets, while others fired at him with pistols. He avoided the balls by jumping from side to side, or by stooping; for he seemed not only to see, hear, and act, but to divine every movement of his enemies, and appeared more than a man, or only man because he was mortal. Then he thought that to kill Monsoreau would be the best way to end the combat,

and sought him with his eyes among his assailants, but he stood in the background, loading the pistols for his men. However, Bussy rushed forward, and found himself face to face with him. He, who held a loaded pistol, fired, and the ball, striking Bussy's sword, broke it off six inches from the handle.

"Disarmed!" cried Monsoreau.

Bussy drew back, picking up his broken blade, and in an instant it was fastened to the handle with a handkerchief; and the battle recommenced, presenting the extraordinary spectacle of a man almost without arms, but also almost without wounds, keeping six enemies at bay, and with ten corpses at his feet for a rampart. When the fight began again, Monsoreau commenced to draw away the bodies, lest Bussy should snatch a sword from one of them. Bussy was surrounded; the blade of his sword bent and shook in his hand, and fatigue began to render his arm heavy, when suddenly, one of the bodies raising itself, pushed a rapier into his hand. It was Rémy's last act of devotion. Bussy uttered a cry of joy, and threw away his broken sword: at the same moment Monsoreau fired at Rémy, and the ball entered his brain. This time he fell to rise no more.

Bussy uttered a cry. His strength seemed to return to him, and he whirled round his sword in a circle, cutting through a wrist at his right hand, and laying open a cheek at his left. Exhausted by the effort, he let his right arm fall for a moment, while with his left he tried to undraw the bolts behind him. During this second, he received a ball in his thigh, and two swords touched his side. But he had unfastened the bolt, and turned the key. Sublime with rage, he rushed on Monsoreau, and wounded him in the breast.

"Ah!" cried Bussy, "I begin to think I shall escape." The four men rushed on him, but they could not touch him, and were repulsed with blows. Monsoreau approached him twice more, and twice more was wounded. But three men seized hold of the handle of his sword, and tore it from him. He seized a stool of carved wood, and struck three blows with it, and knocked down two men; but it broke on the shoulder of the third, who sent his dagger into Bussy's breast.

Bussy seized him by the wrist, forced the dagger from him, and stabbed him to the heart. The last man jumped out of the window. Bussy made two steps to follow him, but Monsoreau, raising himself from the floor, where he was lying, wounded him in the leg with his dagger. The young man seized a sword which lay near, and plunged it so vigorously into his breast, that he pinned him to the floor.

"Ah!" cried Bussy, "I do not know if I shall live, but at least I shall have seen you die!"

Bussy dragged himself to the corridor, his wounds bleeding fearfully. He threw a last glance behind him. The moon was shining brilliantly, and its light penetrated this room inundated with blood, and illuminated the walls pierced by balls, and hacked by blows, and lighted up the pale faces of the dead, which even then seemed to preserve the fierce look of assassins.

Bussy, at the sight of this field of battle, peopled by him with slain, nearly dying as he was, experienced a feeling of pride. As he had intended, he had done what no man had done before him. There now remained to him only to fly.

But all was not over for the unfortunate young man. On arriving on the staircase, he saw arms shine in the courtyard; some one fired, and the ball pierced his shoulder. The court being guarded, he thought of the little window, where Diana had said she would sit to see the combat, and as quickly as he could he dragged himself there, and locked the door behind him; then he mounted the window with great difficulty, and measured the distance with his eyes, wondering if he could jump to the other side.

"Oh, I shall never have the strength!" cried he.

But at that moment he heard steps coming up the staircase; it was the second troop mounting. He collected all his strength, and made a spring;

but his foot slipped, and he fell on the iron spikes, which caught his clothes, and he hung suspended.

He thought of his only friend.

"St. Luc!" cried he, "help! St. Luc!"

"Ah, it is you, M. de Bussy," answered a voice from behind some trees.

Bussy shuddered, for it was not the voice of St. Luc.

"St. Luc!" cried he again, "come to me! Diana is safe! I have killed Monsoreau!"

"Ah! Monsoreau is killed?" said the same voice.

"Yes." Then Bussy saw two men come out from behind the trees.

"Gentlemen," cried he, "in heaven's name, help an unfortunate nobleman, who may still escape if you aid him."

"What do you say, monseigneur?" said one.

"Imprudent!" said the other.

"Monseigneur," cried Bussy, who heard the conversation, "deliver me, and I will pardon you for betraying me."

"Do you hear?" said the duke.

"What do you order?"

"That you deliver him from his sufferings," said he, with a kind of laugh.

Bussy turned his head to look at the man who laughed at such a time, and at the same instant an arquebuse was discharged into his breast.

"Cursed assassin! oh, Diana!" murmured he, and fell back dead.

"Is he dead?" cried several men who, after forcing the door, appeared at the windows.

"Yes," said Aurilly. "But fly; remember that his highness the Duc d'Anjou was the friend and protector of M. de Bussy."

The men instantly made off, and when the sound of their steps was lost, the duke said, "Now, Aurilly, go up into the room and throw out of the window the body of Monsoreau."

Aurilly obeyed, and the blood fell over the clothes of the duke, who, however, raised the coat of the dead man, and drew out the paper which he had signed.

"This is all I wanted," said he; "so now let us go."

"And Diana?"

"Ma foi! I care no more for her. Untie her and St. Luc, and let them go."

Aurilly disappeared.

"I shall not be king of France," murmured the duke, "but, at all events, I shall not be beheaded for high treason."