

Chapter XVIII. A Night at the Bastile.

Pain, anguish, and suffering in human life are always in proportion to the strength with which a man is endowed. We will not pretend to say that Heaven always apportions to a man's capability of endurance the anguish with which he afflicts him; for that, indeed, would not be true, since Heaven permits the existence of death, which is, sometimes, the only refuge open to those who are too closely pressed--too bitterly afflicted, as far as the body is concerned. Suffering is in proportion to the strength which has been accorded; in other words, the weak suffer more, where the trial is the same, than the strong. And what are the elementary principles, we may ask, that compose human strength? Is it not--more than anything else--exercise, habit, experience? We shall not even take the trouble to demonstrate this, for it is an axiom in morals, as in physics. When the young king, stupefied and crushed in every sense and feeling, found himself led to a cell in the Bastile, he fancied death itself is but a sleep; that it, too, has its dreams as well; that the bed had broken through the flooring of his room at Vaux; that death had resulted from the occurrence; and that, still carrying out his dream, the king, Louis XIV., now no longer living, was dreaming one of those horrors, impossible to realize in life, which is termed dethronement, imprisonment, and insult towards a sovereign who formerly wielded unlimited power. To be present at--an actual witness, too--of this bitterness of death; to float, indecisively, in an incomprehensible mystery, between resemblance and reality; to hear everything, to see everything, without interfering in a single detail of agonizing suffering, was--so the king thought within himself--a torture far more terrible, since it might last forever. "Is this what is termed eternity--hell?" he murmured, at the moment the door was closed upon him, which we remember Baisemeaux had shut with his own hands. He did not even look round him; and in the room, leaning with his back against the wall, he allowed himself to be carried away by the terrible supposition that he was already dead, as he closed his eyes, in order to avoid looking upon something even worse still. "How can I have died?" he said to himself, sick with terror. "The bed might have been let down by some artificial means? But no! I do not remember to have felt a bruise, nor any shock either. Would they not rather have poisoned me at my meals, or with the fumes of wax, as they did my ancestress, Jeanne d'Albret?" Suddenly, the chill of the dungeons seemed to fall like a wet cloak upon Louis's shoulders. "I have seen," he said, "my father lying dead upon his funeral couch, in his regal robes. That pale face, so calm and worn; those hands, once so skillful, lying nerveless by his side; those limbs stiffened by the icy grasp of death; nothing there betokened a sleep that was disturbed by dreams. And yet, how numerous were the dreams which Heaven might have sent that royal corpse--him whom so many others had preceded, hurried away by him into eternal death! No, that king was still the king: he was enthroned still upon that funeral couch, as upon a velvet armchair; he had not abdicated one title of his

majesty. God, who had not punished him, cannot, will not punish me, who have done nothing." A strange sound attracted the young man's attention. He looked round him, and saw on the mantel-shelf, just below an enormous crucifix, coarsely painted in fresco on the wall, a rat of enormous size engaged in nibbling a piece of dry bread, but fixing all the time, an intelligent and inquiring look upon the new occupant of the cell. The king could not resist a sudden impulse of fear and disgust: he moved back towards the door, uttering a loud cry; and as if he but needed this cry, which escaped from his breast almost unconsciously, to recognize himself, Louis knew that he was alive and in full possession of his natural senses. "A prisoner!" he cried. "I--I, a prisoner!" He looked round him for a bell to summon some one to him. "There are no bells in the Bastile," he said, "and it is in the Bastile I am imprisoned. In what way can I have been made a prisoner? It must have been owing to a conspiracy of M. Fouquet. I have been drawn to Vaux, as to a snare. M. Fouquet cannot be acting alone in this affair. His agent--That voice that I but just now heard was M. d'Herblay's; I recognized it. Colbert was right, then. But what is Fouquet's object? To reign in my place and stead?--Impossible. Yet who knows!" thought the king, relapsing into gloom again. "Perhaps my brother, the Duc d'Orleans, is doing that which my uncle wished to do during the whole of his life against my father. But the queen?--My mother, too? And La Valliere? Oh! La Valliere, she will have been abandoned to Madame. Dear, dear girl! Yes, it is--it must be so. They have shut her up as they have me. We are separated forever!" And at this idea of separation the poor lover burst into a flood of tears and sobs and groans.

"There is a governor in this place," the king continued, in a fury of passion; "I will speak to him, I will summon him to me."

He called--no voice replied to his. He seized hold of his chair, and hurled it against the massive oaken door. The wood resounded against the door, and awakened many a mournful echo in the profound depths of the staircase; but from a human creature, none.

This was a fresh proof for the king of the slight regard in which he was held at the Bastile. Therefore, when his first fit of anger had passed away, having remarked a barred window through which there passed a stream of light, lozenge-shaped, which must be, he knew, the bright orb of approaching day, Louis began to call out, at first gently enough, then louder and louder still; but no one replied. Twenty other attempts which he made, one after another, obtained no other or better success. His blood began to boil within him, and mount to his head. His nature was such, that, accustomed to command, he trembled at the idea of disobedience. The prisoner broke the chair, which was too heavy for him to lift, and made use of it as a battering ram to strike against the door. He struck so loudly, and so repeatedly, that the perspiration soon began to pour down his face. The sound became tremendous and continuous;

certain stifled, smothered cries replied in different directions. This sound produced a strange effect upon the king. He paused to listen; it was the voice of the prisoners, formerly his victims, now his companions. The voices ascended like vapors through the thick ceilings and the massive walls, and rose in accusations against the author of this noise, as doubtless their sighs and tears accused, in whispered tones, the author of their captivity. After having deprived so many people of their liberty, the king came among them to rob them of their rest. This idea almost drove him mad; it redoubled his strength, or rather his will, bent upon obtaining some information, or a conclusion to the affair. With a portion of the broken chair he recommenced the noise. At the end of an hour, Louis heard something in the corridor, behind the door of his cell, and a violent blow, which was returned upon the door itself, made him cease his own.

"Are you mad?" said a rude, brutal voice. "What is the matter with you this morning?"

"This morning!" thought the king; but he said aloud, politely, "Monsieur, are you the governor of the Bastille?"

"My good fellow, your head is out of sorts," replied the voice; "but that is no reason why you should make such a terrible disturbance. Be quiet; mordieux!"

"Are you the governor?" the king inquired again.

He heard a door on the corridor close; the jailer had just left, not condescending to reply a single word. When the king had assured himself of his departure, his fury knew no longer any bounds. As agile as a tiger, he leaped from the table to the window, and struck the iron bars with all his might. He broke a pane of glass, the pieces of which fell clanking into the courtyard below. He shouted with increasing hoarseness, "The governor, the governor!" This excess lasted fully an hour, during which time he was in a burning fever. With his hair in disorder and matted on his forehead, his dress torn and covered with dust and plaster, his linen in shreds, the king never rested until his strength was utterly exhausted, and it was not until then that he clearly understood the pitiless thickness of the walls, the impenetrable nature of the cement, invincible to every influence but that of time, and that he possessed no other weapon but despair. He leaned his forehead against the door, and let the feverish throbbings of his heart calm by degrees; it had seemed as if one single additional pulsation would have made it burst.

"A moment will come when the food which is given to the prisoners will be brought to me. I shall then see some one, I shall speak to him, and get an answer."

And the king tried to remember at what hour the first repast of the prisoners was served at the Bastille; he was ignorant even of this detail. The feeling of remorse at this remembrance smote him like the thrust of a dagger, that he should have lived for five and twenty years a king, and in the enjoyment of every happiness, without having bestowed a moment's thought on the misery of those who had been unjustly deprived of their liberty. The king blushed for very shame. He felt that Heaven, in permitting this fearful humiliation, did no more than render to the man the same torture as had been inflicted by that man upon so many others. Nothing could be more efficacious for reawakening his mind to religious influences than the prostration of his heart and mind and soul beneath the feeling of such acute wretchedness. But Louis dared not even kneel in prayer to God to entreat him to terminate his bitter trial.

"Heaven is right," he said; "Heaven acts wisely. It would be cowardly to pray to Heaven for that which I have so often refused my own fellow-creatures."

He had reached this stage of his reflections, that is, of his agony of mind, when a similar noise was again heard behind his door, followed this time by the sound of the key in the lock, and of the bolts being withdrawn from their staples. The king bounded forward to be nearer to the person who was about to enter, but, suddenly reflecting that it was a movement unworthy of a sovereign, he paused, assumed a noble and calm expression, which for him was easy enough, and waited with his back turned towards the window, in order, to some extent, to conceal his agitation from the eyes of the person who was about to enter. It was only a jailer with a basket of provisions. The king looked at the man with restless anxiety, and waited until he spoke.

"Ah!" said the latter, "you have broken your chair. I said you had done so! Why, you have gone quite mad."

"Monsieur," said the king, "be careful what you say; it will be a very serious affair for you."

The jailer placed the basket on the table, and looked at his prisoner steadily. "What do you say?" he said.

"Desire the governor to come to me," added the king, in accents full of calm and dignity.

"Come, my boy," said the turnkey, "you have always been very quiet and reasonable, but you are getting vicious, it seems, and I wish you to know it in time. You have broken your chair, and made a great disturbance; that is an offense punishable by imprisonment in one of the lower dungeons. Promise me not to begin over again, and I will not say a word about it to the governor."

"I wish to see the governor," replied the king, still governing his passions.

"He will send you off to one of the dungeons, I tell you; so take care."

"I insist upon it, do you hear?"

"Ah! ah! your eyes are becoming wild again. Very good! I shall take away your knife."

And the jailer did what he said, quitted the prisoner, and closed the door, leaving the king more astounded, more wretched, more isolated than ever. It was useless, though he tried it, to make the same noise again on his door, and equally useless that he threw the plates and dishes out of the window; not a single sound was heard in recognition. Two hours afterwards he could not be recognized as a king, a gentleman, a man, a human being; he might rather be called a madman, tearing the door with his nails, trying to tear up the flooring of his cell, and uttering such wild and fearful cries that the old Bastille seemed to tremble to its very foundations for having revolted against its master. As for the governor, the jailer did not even think of disturbing him; the turnkeys and the sentinels had reported the occurrence to him, but what was the good of it? Were not these madmen common enough in such a prison? and were not the walls still stronger? M. de Baisemeaux, thoroughly impressed with what Aramis had told him, and in perfect conformity with the king's order, hoped only that one thing might happen; namely, that the madman Marchiali might be mad enough to hang himself to the canopy of his bed, or to one of the bars of the window. In fact, the prisoner was anything but a profitable investment for M. Baisemeaux, and became more annoying than agreeable to him. These complications of Seldon and Marchiali--the complications first of setting at liberty and then imprisoning again, the complications arising from the strong likeness in question--had at last found a very proper denouement. Baisemeaux even thought he had remarked that D'Herblay himself was not altogether dissatisfied with the result.

"And then, really," said Baisemeaux to his next in command, "an ordinary prisoner is already unhappy enough in being a prisoner; he suffers quite enough, indeed, to induce one to hope, charitably enough, that his death may not be far distant. With still greater reason, accordingly, when the prisoner has gone mad, and might bite and make a terrible disturbance in the Bastille; why, in such a case, it is not simply an act of mere charity to wish him dead; it would be almost a good and even commendable action, quietly to have him put out of his misery."

And the good-natured governor thereupon sat down to his late breakfast.

