

Chapter 5

THE EXECUTION.

The councilors entered.

"Well, gentlemen," said the king, "is there anything new?"

"Sire," replied the president, "we come to beg your majesty to promise life to the criminal; he has revelations to make, which, on this promise, we shall obtain."

"But have we not obtained them?"

"Yes, in part; is that enough for your majesty?"

"No," said Catherine; "and the king has determined to postpone the execution, if the culprit will sign a confession substantiating his depositions before the judge."

"Yes," said Henri, "and you can let the prisoner know this."

"Your majesty has nothing to add?"

"Only that there must be no variation in the confessions, or I withdraw my promise; they must be complete."

"Yes, sire; with the names of the compromised parties."

"With all the names."

"Even if they are of high rank?"

"If they were those of my nearest relations."

"It shall be as your majesty wishes."

"No misunderstanding, M. Brisson. Writing materials shall be brought to the prisoner, and he will write his confessions; after that we shall see."

"But I may promise?"

"Oh! yes, promise."

M. Brisson and the councilors withdrew.

"He will speak, sire," said the queen; "and your majesty will pardon him. See the foam on his lips."

"No," said Catherine; "he is seeking something. What is it?"

"Parbleu!" said Henri; "he seeks M. le Duc de Guise, M. le Duc de Parma,

and my brother, the very Catholic king. Yes, seek, wait; do you believe that there is more chance of rescue on the Place de Greve than on the route from Flanders?"

Salcedo had seen the archers sent off for the horses, and he understood that the order for punishment was about to be given, and it was then that he bit his lips till they were covered with blood, as the queen had remarked.

"No one," murmured he; "not one of those who had promised me help. Cowards! cowards!"

The horses were now seen making their way through the crowd, and creating everywhere an opening which closed immediately behind them. As they passed the corner of the Rue St. Vannerie, a handsome young man, whom we have seen before, was pushed forward impatiently by a young lad, apparently about seventeen. It was the Vicomte Ernanton de Carmainges and the mysterious page.

"Quick!" cried the page; "throw yourself into the opening, there is not a moment to lose."

"But we shall be stifled; you are mad, my little friend."

"I must be near," cried the page, imperiously. "Keep close to the horses, or we shall never arrive there."

"But before we get there, you will be torn to pieces."

"Never mind me, only go on."

"The horses will kick."

"Take hold of the tail of the last; a horse never kicks when you hold him so."

Ernanton gave way in spite of himself to the mysterious influence of this lad, and seized the tail of the horse, while the page clung to him. And thus, through the crowd, waving like the sea, leaving here a piece of a cloak, and there a fragment of a doublet, they arrived with the horses at a few steps from the scaffold.

"Have we arrived?" asked the young man, panting.

"Yes, happily!" answered Ernanton, "for I am exhausted."

"I cannot see."

"Come before me."

"Oh, no! not yet. What are they doing?"

"Making slip knots at the ends of the cords."

"And he--what is he doing?"

"Who?"

"The condemned."

"His eyes turn incessantly from side to side."

The horses were near enough to enable the executioner to tie the feet and hands of the criminal to the harness. Salcede uttered a cry when he felt the cord in contact with his flesh.

"Monsieur," said the Lieutenant Tanchon to him politely, "will it please you to address the people?" and added in a whisper, "a confession will save your life."

Salcede looked earnestly at him, as though to read the truth in his eyes.

"You see," continued Tanchon, "they abandon you. There is no other hope in the world but what I offer you."

"Well!" said Salcede, with a sigh, "I am ready to speak."

"It is a written and signed confession that the king exacts."

"Then untie my hands, and give me a pen and I will write it."

They loosened the cords from his wrists, and an usher who stood near with writing materials placed them before him on the scaffold. "Now," said Tanchon, "state everything."

"Do not fear; I will not forget those who have forgotten me;" but as he spoke, he cast another glance around.

While this was passing, the page, seizing the hand of Ernanton, cried, "Monsieur, take me in your arms, I beg you, and raise me above the heads of the people who prevent me from seeing."

"Ah! you are insatiable, young man."

"This one more service; I must see the condemned, indeed I must."

Then, as Ernanton still hesitated, he cried, "For pity's sake, monsieur, I entreat you."

Ernanton raised him in his arms at this last appeal, and was somewhat astonished at the delicacy of the body he held. Just as Salcede had taken the pen, and looked round as we have said, he saw this young lad above the crowd, with two fingers placed on his lips. An indescribable joy spread itself instantaneously over the face of the condemned man, for he recognized the signal so impatiently waited for, and which announced that aid was near. After a moment's hesitation, however, he took the paper and began to write.

"He writes!" cried the crowd.

"He writes!" exclaimed Catherine.

"He writes!" cried the king, "and I will pardon him."

Suddenly Salcede stopped and looked again at the lad, who repeated the signal. He wrote on, then stopped to look once more; the signal was again repeated.

"Have you finished?" asked Tanchon.

"Yes."--"Then sign."

Salcede signed, with his eyes still fixed on the young man. "For the king alone," said he, and he gave the paper to the usher, though with hesitation.

"If you have disclosed all," said Tanchon, "you are safe."

A strange smile strayed over the lips of Salcede. Ernanton, who was fatigued, wished now to put down the page, who made no opposition. With him disappeared all that had sustained the unfortunate man; he looked round wildly and cried: "Well, come!"

No one answered.

"Quick! quick! the king holds the paper; he is reading!"

Still there was no response.

The king unfolded the paper.

"Thousand devils!" cried Salcede, "if they have deceived me! Yet it was she--it was really she!"

No sooner had the king read the first lines, than he called out indignantly, "Oh! the wretch!"

"What is it, my son?"

"He retracts all--he pretends that he confessed nothing; and he declares that the Guises are innocent of any plot!"

"But," said Catherine, "if it be true?"

"He lies!" cried the king.

"How do you know, my son? Perhaps the Guises have been calumniated: the judges, in their zeal, may have put false interpretation on the depositions."

"Oh! no, madame; I heard them myself!" cried Henri.

"You, my son?"

"Yes, I?"

"How so?"

"When the criminal was questioned, I was behind a curtain and heard all he said."

"Well, then, if he will have it, order the horses to pull."

Henri, in anger, gave the sign. It was repeated, the cords were refastened, four men jumped on the horses, which, urged by violent blows, started off in opposite directions. A horrible cracking, and a terrible cry was heard. The blood was seen to spout from the limbs of the unhappy man, whose face was no longer that of a man but of a demon.

"Ah, heaven!" he cried; "I will speak, I will tell all. Ah! cursed duch--"

The voice had been heard above everything, but suddenly it ceased.

"Stop, stop," cried Catherine, "let him speak."

But it was too late; the head of Salcede fell helplessly on one side, he glanced once more to where he had seen the page, and then expired.

Tanchon gave some rapid orders to his archers, who plunged into the crowd in the direction indicated by Salcede's glance.

"I am discovered!" said the page to Ernanton. "For pity's sake, aid me! they come, they come!"

"What do you want?"

"To fly! Do you not see that it is me they want?"

"But who are you, then?"

"A woman. Oh, save me! protect me!"

Ernanton turned pale; but generosity triumphed over fear. He placed his protégée before him, opened a path with blows, and pushed her toward the corner of the Rue du Mouton, toward an open door. Into this door she entered; and she seemed to have been expected, for it closed behind her. Ernanton had not even time to ask her name, or where he should find her again; but in disappearing she had made a sign full of promise.

Meanwhile, Catherine was standing up in her place, full of rage.

"My son," said she, at last, "you would do well to change your executioner; he is a leaguer."

"What do you mean, mother?"

"Salcede suffered only one draw, and he is dead."

"Because he was too sensible to pain."

"No; but because he has been strangled with a fine cord underneath the scaffold, just as he was about to accuse those who let him die. Let a doctor examine him, and I am certain that he will find round his neck the circle that the cord has left."

"You are right!" cried Henri, with flashing eyes; "my cousin of Guise is better served than I am!"

"Hush, my son--no éclat; we shall only be laughed at, for once more we have missed our aim."

"Joyeuse did well to go and amuse himself elsewhere," said the king;
"one can reckon on nothing in this world--not even on punishments. Come, ladies, let us go."