

Chapter 72

THE EXPEDITION.

Henri, full of joy, hastened to Diana and Romy.

"Get ready; in a quarter of an hour we set out," said he. "You will find two horses saddled at the door of the little wooden staircase leading to this corridor: join my suite and say nothing."

Then, going out on the balcony, he cried:

"Trumpet of the gendarmes, sound the call."

The call was quickly heard, and all the gendarmes ranged themselves round the house.

"Gendarmes," said Henri, "my brother has given me, for the time, the command of your company, and has ordered me to set out to-night to obtain provisions and information as to the movements of the enemy, and one hundred of you are to accompany me; the mission is dangerous, but necessary for the safety of all. Who are willing to go?" The whole three hundred offered themselves.

"Gentlemen," said Henri, "I thank you all; you have rightly been called the example to the army, but I can but take one hundred; and as I do not

wish to choose, let chance decide. Monsieur," continued he, to the ensign, "draw lots, if you please."

While this was being done, Joyeuse gave his last instructions to his brother.

"Listen, Henri," said he; "the country is drying, and there is a communication between Courteig and Rupelmonde; you will march between a river and a stream--the Scheldt and the Rupel. I trust that there will be no necessity for you to go as far as Rupelmonde to find provisions. My men took three peasants prisoners; I give one of them to you for a guide--but no false pity! at the least appearance of treason shoot him without mercy."

He then tenderly embraced his brother, and gave the order for departure. The one hundred men drawn by lots were ready, and the guide was placed between two, with pistols in their hands, while Remy and his companion mixed with the rest. Henri gave no directions about them, thinking that curiosity was already quite sufficiently aroused about them, without augmenting it by precautions more dangerous than salutary. He himself did not stay by them, but rode at the head of his company. Their march was slow, for often the ground nearly gave way under them, and they sank in the mud. Sometimes figures were seen flying over the plain; they were peasants who had been rather too quick in returning to their homes, and who fled at the sight of the enemy. Sometimes, however, they were unlucky Frenchmen, half dead with cold and hunger, and who in their

uncertainty of meeting with friends or enemies, preferred waiting for daylight to continue their painful journey.

They traversed two leagues in three hours, which brought the adventurous band to the banks of the Rupel, along which a stony road ran; but here danger succeeded to difficulty, and two or three horses lost their footing on the slimy stones, and rolled with their riders into the still rapid waters of the river. More than once also, from some boat on the opposite bank, shots were fired, and one man was killed at Diana's side. She manifested regret for the man, but no fear for herself. Henri, in these different circumstances, showed himself to be a worthy captain and true friend; he rode first, telling all the men to follow in his steps, trusting less to his own sagacity than to that of the horse his brother had given him. Three leagues from Rupelmonde the gendarmes came upon six

French soldiers sitting by a turf fire; the unfortunates were cooking some horse-flesh, the only food they had had for two days. The approach of the gendarmes caused great trouble among the guests at this sad feast; two or three rose to fly, but the others stopped them, saying, "If they are enemies they can but kill us, and all will be over."

"France! France!" cried Henri.

On recognizing their countrymen they ran to them, and were given cloaks to wrap round them and something to drink, and were allowed to mount en croup behind the valets, and in this manner they accompanied the detachment. Half a league further on they met four men of the 4th Light

Horse, with, however, only one horse between them; they were also welcomed. At last they arrived on the banks of the Scheldt; the night was dark, and the gendarmes found two men who were trying, in bad Flemish, to obtain from a boatman a passage to the other side, which he refused. The ensign, who understood Dutch, advanced softly, and heard the boatman say, "You are French, and shall die here; you shall not cross."

"It is you who shall die, if you do not take us over at once," replied one of the men, drawing his dagger.

"Keep firm, monsieur," cried the ensign, "we will come to your aid."

But as the two men turned at these words, the boatman loosened the rope, and pushed rapidly from the shore. One of the gendarmes, however, knowing how useful this boat would be, went into the stream on his horse and fired at the boatman, who fell. The boat was left without a guide, but the current brought it back again toward the bank. The two strangers seized it at once and got in. This astonished the ensign.

"Gentlemen," said he, "who are you, if you please?"

"Gentlemen, we are marine officers, and you are gendarmes of Aunis, apparently."

"Yes, gentlemen, and very happy to have served you; will you not accompany us?"

"Willingly."

"Get into the wagons, then, if you are too tired to ride."

"May we ask where are you going?" said one.

"Monsieur, our orders are to push on to Rupelmonde."

"Take care," answered he. "We did not pass the stream sooner, because this morning a detachment of Spaniards passed, coming from Antwerp. At sunset we thought we might venture, for two men inspire no disquietude; but you, a whole troop--"

"It is true; I will call our chief."

Henri approached, and asked what was the matter.

"These gentlemen met this morning a detachment of Spaniards following the same road as ourselves."

"How many were they?"

"About fifty."

"And does that stop you?"

"No, but I think it would be well to secure the boat, in case we should wish to pass the stream; it will hold twenty men."

"Good! let us keep the boat. There should be some houses at the junction of the Scheldt and Rupel?"

"There is a village," said a voice.

"Then let two men descend the stream with the boat, while we go along the bank."

"We will bring the boat if you will let us," said one of the officers.

"If you wish it, gentlemen; but do not lose sight of us, and come to us in the village."

"But if we abandon the boat some one will take it?"

"You will find ten men waiting, to whom you can deliver it."

"It is well," said one, and they pushed off from the shore.

"It is singular," said Henri, "but I fancy I know that voice."

An hour after they arrived at the village, which was occupied by the fifty Spaniards, but they, taken by surprise when they least expected it, made little resistance. Henri had them disarmed and shut up in the

strongest house in the village, and left ten men to guard them. Ten more were sent to guard the boat, and ten others placed as sentinels, with the promise of being relieved in an hour. Twenty of the others then sat down in the house opposite to that in which the prisoners were, to the supper which had been prepared for them. Henri chose a separate room for Remy and Diana; he then placed the ensign at table with the others, telling him to invite the two naval officers when they arrived. He next went out to look for accommodation for the rest of the men, and when he returned in half-an-hour he found them waiting supper for him. Some had fallen asleep on their chairs, but his entrance roused them. The table, covered with cheese, pork, and bread, with a pot of beer by each man, looked almost tempting. Henri sat down and told them to begin.

"Apropos!" said he, "have the strangers arrived?"

"Yes, there they are at the end of the table."

Henri looked and saw them in the darkest corner of the room.

"Gentlemen," said he, "you are badly placed, and I think you are not eating."

"Thanks, M. le Comte," said one, "we are very tired, and more in need of rest than food; we told your officers so, but they insisted, saying that it was your orders that we should sup with you. We feel the honor, but if, nevertheless, instead of keeping us longer you would give us a room--"

"Is that also the wish of your companion?" said Henri, and he looked at this companion, whose hat was pushed down over his eyes, and who had not yet spoken.

"Yes, comte," replied he, in a scarcely audible voice.

Henri rose, walked straight to the end of the table, while every one watched his movements and astonished look.

"Monsieur," said he, to the one who had spoken first, "do me a favor?"

"What is it, M. le Comte?"

"Tell me if you are not Aurilly's brother, or Aurilly himself?"

"Aurilly!" cried all.

"And let your companion," continued Henri, "raise his hat a little and let me see his face, or else I shall call him monseigneur, and bow before him." And as he spoke he bowed respectfully, hat in hand. The officer took off his hat.

"Monseigneur le Duc d'Anjou!" cried all. "The duke, living!"

"Ma foi, gentlemen," replied he, "since you will recognize your

conquered and fugitive prince, I shall not deny myself to you any longer. I am the Duc d'Anjou."

"Vive, monseigneur!" cried all.