

CHAPTER VI—THE ESCAPE

The time for our escape drew near, and the nearer it came the less we seemed to enjoy the prospect. There is but one side on which this castle can be left either with dignity or safety; but as there is the main gate and guard, and the chief street of the upper city, it is not to be thought of by escaping prisoners. In all other directions an abominable precipice surrounds it, down the face of which (if anywhere at all) we must regain our liberty. By our concurrent labours in many a dark night, working with the most anxious precautions against noise, we had made out to pierce below the curtain about the south-west corner, in a place they call the Devil's Elbow. I have never met that celebrity; nor (if the rest of him at all comes up to what they called his elbow) have I the least desire of his acquaintance. From the heel of the masonry, the rascally, breakneck precipice descended sheer among waste lands, scattered suburbs of the city, and houses in the building. I had never the heart to look for any length of time—the thought that I must make the descent in person some dark night robbing me of breath; and, indeed, on anybody not a seaman or a steeple-jack, the mere sight of the Devil's Elbow wrought like an emetic.

I don't know where the rope was got, and doubt if I much cared. It was not that which gravelled me, but whether, now that we had it, it would serve our turn. Its length, indeed, we made a shift to fathom out; but who was to tell us how that length compared with the way we had to go?

Day after day, there would be always some of us stolen out to the Devil's Elbow and making estimates of the descent, whether by a bare guess or the dropping of stones. A private of pioneers remembered the formula for that—or else remembered part of it and obligingly invented the remainder. I had never any real confidence in that formula; and even had we got it from a book, there were difficulties in the way of the application that might have daunted Archimedes. We durst not drop any considerable pebble lest the sentinels should hear, and those that we dropped we could not hear ourselves. We had never a watch—or none that had a second-hand; and though every one of us could guess a second to a nicety, all somehow guessed it differently. In short, if any two set forth upon this enterprise, they invariably returned with two opinions, and often with a black eye in the bargain. I looked on upon these proceedings, although not without laughter, yet with impatience and disgust. I am one that cannot bear to see things botched or gone upon with ignorance; and the thought that some poor devil was to hazard his bones upon such premises, revolted me. Had I guessed the name of that unhappy first adventurer, my sentiments might have been livelier still.

The designation of this personage was indeed all that remained for us to do; and even in that we had advanced so far that the lot had fallen on Shed B. It had been determined to mingle the bitter and the sweet; and whoever went down first, the whole of his shed-mates were to follow next in order. This caused a good deal of joy in Shed B, and would have caused more if it had not still remained to choose our pioneer. In view of the ambiguity in which we lay as to the length of the rope and the

height of the precipice—and that this gentleman was to climb down from fifty to seventy fathoms on a pitchy night, on a rope entirely free, and with not so much as an infant child to steady it at the bottom, a little backwardness was perhaps excusable. But it was, in our case, more than a little. The truth is, we were all womanish fellows about a height; and I have myself been put, more than once, hors de combat by a less affair than the rock of Edinburgh Castle.

We discussed it in the dark and between the passage of the rounds; and it was impossible for any body of men to show a less adventurous spirit. I am sure some of us, and myself first among the number, regretted Goguelat. Some were persuaded it was safe, and could prove the same by argument; but if they had good reasons why some one else should make the trial, they had better still why it should not be themselves. Others, again, condemned the whole idea as insane; among these, as ill-luck would have it, a seaman of the fleet; who was the most dispiriting of all. The height, he reminded us, was greater than the tallest ship's mast, the rope entirely free; and he as good as defied the boldest and strongest to succeed. We were relieved from this dead-lock by our serjeant-major of dragoons.

'Comrades,' said he, 'I believe I rank you all; and for that reason, if you really wish it, I will be the first myself. At the same time, you are to consider what the chances are that I may prove to be the last, as well. I am no longer young—I was sixty near a month ago. Since I have been a prisoner, I have made for myself a little bedaine. My arms are

all gone to fat. And you must promise not to blame me, if I fall and play the devil with the whole thing.'

'We cannot hear of such a thing!' said I. 'M. Laclas is the oldest man here; and, as such, he should be the very last to offer. It is plain, we must draw lots.'

'No,' said M. Laclas; 'you put something else in my head! There is one here who owes a pretty candle to the others, for they have kept his secret. Besides, the rest of us are only rabble; and he is another affair altogether. Let Champdivers—let the noble go the first.'

I confess there was a notable pause before the noble in question got his voice. But there was no room for choice. I had been so ill-advised, when I first joined the regiment, as to take ground on my nobility. I had been often rallied on the matter in the ranks, and had passed under the by-names of Monseigneur and the Marquis. It was now needful I should justify myself and take a fair revenge.

Any little hesitation I may have felt passed entirely unnoticed, from the lucky incident of a round happening at that moment to go by. And during the interval of silence there occurred something that sent my blood to the boil. There was a private in our shed called Clausel, a man of a very ugly disposition. He had made one of the followers of Goguelat; but, whereas Goguelat had always a kind of monstrous gaiety about him, Clausel was no less morose than he was evil-minded. He was sometimes

called the General, and sometimes by a name too ill-mannered for repetition. As we all sat listening, this man's hand was laid on my shoulder, and his voice whispered in my ear: 'If you don't go, I'll have you hanged, Marquis!'

As soon as the round was past—'Certainly, gentlemen!' said I. 'I will give you a lead, with all the pleasure in the world. But, first of all, there is a hound here to be punished. M. Clausel has just insulted me, and dishonoured the French army; and I demand that he run the gauntlet of this shed.'

There was but one voice asking what he had done, and, as soon as I had told them, but one voice agreeing to the punishment. The General was, in consequence, extremely roughly handled, and the next day was congratulated by all who saw him on his new decorations. It was lucky for us that he was one of the prime movers and believers in our project of escape, or he had certainly revenged himself by a denunciation. As for his feelings towards myself, they appeared, by his looks, to surpass humanity; and I made up my mind to give him a wide berth in the future.

Had I been to go down that instant, I believe I could have carried it well. But it was already too late—the day was at hand. The rest had still to be summoned. Nor was this the extent of my misfortune; for the next night, and the night after, were adorned with a perfect galaxy of stars, and showed every cat that stirred in a quarter of a mile. During this interval, I have to direct your sympathies on the Vicomte de

Saint-Yves! All addressed me softly, like folk round a sickbed. Our Italian corporal, who had got a dozen of oysters from a fishwife, laid them at my feet, as though I were a Pagan idol; and I have never since been wholly at my ease in the society of shellfish. He who was the best of our carvers brought me a snuff-box, which he had just completed, and which, while it was yet in hand, he had often declared he would not part with under fifteen dollars. I believe the piece was worth the money too! And yet the voice stuck in my throat with which I must thank him. I found myself, in a word, to be fed up like a prisoner in a camp of anthropophagi, and honoured like the sacrificial bull. And what with these annoyances, and the risky venture immediately ahead, I found my part a trying one to play.

It was a good deal of a relief when the third evening closed about the castle with volumes of sea-fog. The lights of Princes Street sometimes disappeared, sometimes blinked across at us no brighter than the eyes of cats; and five steps from one of the lanterns on the ramparts it was already groping dark. We made haste to lie down. Had our jailers been upon the watch, they must have observed our conversation to die out unusually soon. Yet I doubt if any of us slept. Each lay in his place, tortured at once with the hope of liberty and the fear of a hateful death. The guard call sounded; the hum of the town declined by little and little. On all sides of us, in their different quarters, we could hear the watchman cry the hours along the street. Often enough, during my stay in England, have I listened to these gruff or broken voices; or perhaps gone to my window when I lay sleepless, and watched the old

gentleman hobble by upon the causeway with his cape and his cap, his hanger and his rattle. It was ever a thought with me how differently that cry would re-echo in the chamber of lovers, beside the bed of death, or in the condemned cell. I might be said to hear it that night myself in the condemned cell! At length a fellow with a voice like a bull's began to roar out in the opposite thoroughfare:

'Past yin o'clock, and a dark, haary moarnin'.'

At which we were all silently afoot.

As I stole about the battlements towards the—gallows, I was about to write—the sergeant-major, perhaps doubtful of my resolution, kept close by me, and occasionally proffered the most indigestible reassurances in my ear. At last I could bear them no longer.

'Be so obliging as to let me be!' said I. 'I am neither a coward nor a fool. What do you know of whether the rope be long enough? But I shall know it in ten minutes!'

The good old fellow laughed in his moustache, and patted me.

It was all very well to show the disposition of my temper before a friend alone; before my assembled comrades the thing had to go handsomely. It was then my time to come on the stage; and I hope I took it handsomely.

‘Now, gentlemen,’ said I, ‘if the rope is ready, here is the criminal!’

The tunnel was cleared, the stake driven, the rope extended. As I moved forward to the place, many of my comrades caught me by the hand and wrung

it, an attention I could well have done without.

‘Keep an eye on Clause!’ I whispered to Laclas; and with that, got down on my elbows and knees took the rope in both hands, and worked myself, feet foremost, through the tunnel. When the earth failed under my feet, I thought my heart would have stopped; and a moment after I was demeaning

myself in mid-air like a drunken jumping-jack. I have never been a model of piety, but at this juncture prayers and a cold sweat burst from me simultaneously.

The line was knotted at intervals of eighteen inches; and to the inexpert it may seem as if it should have been even easy to descend. The trouble was, this devil of a piece of rope appeared to be inspired, not with life alone, but with a personal malignity against myself. It turned to the one side, paused for a moment, and then spun me like a toasting-jack to the other; slipped like an eel from the clasp of my feet; kept me all the time in the most outrageous fury of exertion; and dashed me at intervals against the face of the rock. I had no eyes to see with; and I doubt if there was anything to see but darkness. I must occasionally have caught a gasp of breath, but it was quite unconscious. And the whole forces of my mind were so consumed with losing hold and getting it again, that I

could scarce have told whether I was going up or coming down.

Of a sudden I knocked against the cliff with such a thump as almost bereft me of my sense; and, as reason twinkled back, I was amazed to find that I was in a state of rest, that the face of the precipice here inclined outwards at an angle which relieved me almost wholly of the burthen of my own weight, and that one of my feet was safely planted on a ledge. I drew one of the sweetest breaths in my experience, hugged myself against the rope, and closed my eyes in a kind of ecstasy of relief. It occurred to me next to see how far I was advanced on my unlucky journey, a point on which I had not a shadow of a guess. I looked up: there was nothing above me but the blackness of the night and the fog. I craned timidly forward and looked down. There, upon a floor of darkness, I beheld a certain pattern of hazy lights, some of them aligned as in thoroughfares, others standing apart as in solitary houses; and before I could well realise it, or had in the least estimated my distance, a wave of nausea and vertigo warned me to lie back and close my eyes. In this situation I had really but the one wish, and that was: something else to think of! Strange to say, I got it: a veil was torn from my mind, and I saw what a fool I was—what fools we had all been—and that I had no business to be thus dangling between earth and heaven by my arms. The only thing to have done was to have attached me to a rope and lowered me, and I had never the wit to see it till that moment!

I filled my lungs, got a good hold on my rope, and once more launched myself on the descent. As it chanced, the worst of the danger was at an

end, and I was so fortunate as to be never again exposed to any violent concussion. Soon after I must have passed within a little distance of a bush of wallflower, for the scent of it came over me with that impression of reality which characterises scents in darkness. This made me a second landmark, the ledge being my first. I began accordingly to compute intervals of time: so much to the ledge, so much again to the wallflower, so much more below. If I were not at the bottom of the rock, I calculated I must be near indeed to the end of the rope, and there was no doubt that I was not far from the end of my own resources. I began to be light-headed and to be tempted to let go,—now arguing that I was certainly arrived within a few feet of the level and could safely risk a fall, anon persuaded I was still close at the top and it was idle to continue longer on the rock. In the midst of which I came to a bearing on plain ground, and had nearly wept aloud. My hands were as good as flayed, my courage entirely exhausted, and, what with the long strain and the sudden relief, my limbs shook under me with more than the violence of ague, and I was glad to cling to the rope.

But this was no time to give way. I had (by God's single mercy) got myself alive out of that fortress; and now I had to try to get the others, my comrades. There was about a fathom of rope to spare; I got it by the end, and searched the whole ground thoroughly for anything to make it fast to. In vain: the ground was broken and stony, but there grew not there so much as a bush of furze.

'Now then,' thought I to myself, 'here begins a new lesson, and I believe

it will prove richer than the first. I am not strong enough to keep this rope extended. If I do not keep it extended the next man will be dashed against the precipice. There is no reason why he should have my extravagant good luck. I see no reason why he should not fall—nor any place for him to fall on but my head.’

From where I was now standing there was occasionally visible, as the fog lightened, a lamp in one of the barrack windows, which gave me a measure of the height he had to fall and the horrid force that he must strike me with. What was yet worse, we had agreed to do without signals: every so many minutes by Laclas’ watch another man was to be started from the battlements. Now, I had seemed to myself to be about half an hour in my descent, and it seemed near as long again that I waited, straining on the rope for my next comrade to begin. I began to be afraid that our conspiracy was out, that my friends were all secured, and that I should pass the remainder of the night, and be discovered in the morning, vainly clinging to the rope’s end like a hooked fish upon an angle. I could not refrain, at this ridiculous image, from a chuckle of laughter. And the next moment I knew, by the jerking of the rope, that my friend had crawled out of the tunnel and was fairly launched on his descent. It appears it was the sailor who had insisted on succeeding me: as soon as my continued silence had assured him the rope was long enough, Gautier, for that was his name, had forgot his former arguments, and shown himself so extremely forward, that Laclas had given way. It was like the fellow, who had no harm in him beyond an instinctive selfishness. But he was like to have paid pretty dearly for the privilege. Do as I would, I

could not keep the rope as I could have wished it; and he ended at last by falling on me from a height of several yards, so that we both rolled together on the ground. As soon as he could breathe he cursed me beyond belief, wept over his finger, which he had broken, and cursed me again. I bade him be still and think shame of himself to be so great a cry-baby. Did he not hear the round going by above? I asked; and who could tell but what the noise of his fall was already remarked, and the sentinels at the very moment leaning upon the battlements to listen?

The round, however, went by, and nothing was discovered; the third man came to the ground quite easily; the fourth was, of course, child's play; and before there were ten of us collected, it seemed to me that, without the least injustice to my comrades, I might proceed to take care of myself.

I knew their plan: they had a map and an almanack, and designed for Grangemouth, where they were to steal a ship. Suppose them to do so, I had no idea they were qualified to manage it after it was stolen. Their whole escape, indeed, was the most haphazard thing imaginable; only the impatience of captives and the ignorance of private soldiers would have entertained so misbegotten a device; and though I played the good comrade and worked with them upon the tunnel, but for the lawyer's message I should have let them go without me. Well, now they were beyond my help, as they had always been beyond my counselling; and, without word said or leave taken, I stole out of the little crowd. It is true I would rather have waited to shake hands with Laclas, but in the last man who had

descended I thought I recognised Clausel, and since the scene in the shed my distrust of Clausel was perfect. I believed the man to be capable of any infamy, and events have since shown that I was right.