Chapter IX

The Evening of the Betrothal

VILLEFORT had, as we have said, hastened back to Madame de Saint-Méran's in the Place du Grand Cours, and on entering the house found that the guests whom he had left at table were taking coffee in the salon. Renée was, with all the rest of the company, anxiously awaiting him, and his entrance was followed by a general exclamation.

'Well, Decapitator, Guardian of the State, Royalist, Brutus, what is the matter?' said one. 'Speak out.'

'Are we threatened with a fresh Reign of Terror?' asked another.

'Has the Corsican ogre broken loose?' cried a third.

'Marquise,' said Villefort, approaching his future mother-in-law, 'I request your pardon for thus leaving you. Will the marquis honour me by a few moments' private conversation?'

'Ah, it is really a serious matter, then?' asked the marquis, remarking the cloud on Villefort's brow.

'So serious that I must take leave of you for a few days; so,' added he, turning to Renée, 'judge for yourself if it be not important.'

'You are going to leave us?' cried Renée, unable to hide her emotion at this unexpected announcement.

'Alas,' returned Villefort, 'I must!'

'Where, then, are you going?' asked the marquise.

'That, madame, is an official secret; but if you have any commissions for Paris, a friend of mine is going there tonight, and will with pleasure undertake them.' The guests looked at each other.

'You wish to speak to me alone?' said the marquis.

'Yes, let us go to the library, please.' The marquis took his arm, and they left the salon.

'Well,' asked he, as soon as they were by themselves, 'tell me what it is?'

'An affair of the greatest importance, that demands my immediate presence in Paris. Now, excuse the indiscretion, marquis, but have you any landed property?'

'All my fortune is in the funds; seven or eight hundred thousand francs.'

'Then sell out—sell out, marquis, or you will lose it all.'

'But how can I sell out here?'

'You have a broker, have you not?'

'Yes.'

'Then give me a letter to him, and tell him to sell out without an instant's delay, perhaps even now I shall arrive too late.'

'The deuce you say!' replied the marquis, 'let us lose no time, then!'

And, sitting down, he wrote a letter to his broker, ordering him to sell out at the market price.

'Now, then,' said Villefort, placing the letter in his pocketbook, 'I must have another!'

'To whom?'

'To the king.'

'To the king?'

'Yes.'

'I dare not write to his majesty.'

'I do not ask you to write to his majesty, but ask M. de Salvieux to do so. I want a letter that will enable me to reach the king's presence without all the formalities of demanding an audience; that would occasion a loss of precious time.'

'But address yourself to the keeper of the seals; he has the right of entry at the Tuileries, and can procure you audience at any hour of the day or night.'

'Doubtless; but there is no occasion to divide the honours of my discovery with him. The keeper would leave me in the background, and take all the glory to himself. I tell you, marquis, my fortune is made if I only reach the Tuileries the first, for the king will not forget the service I do him.'

'In that case go and get ready. I will call Salvieux and make him write the letter.'

'Well,' said Dantès, 'mark this; if you refuse at least to tell Mercédès I am here, I will some day hide myself behind the door, and when you enter I will dash out your brains with this stool.'

'Threats!' cried the jailer, retreating and putting himself on the defensive; 'you are certainly going mad. The abbé began like you, and in three days you will be like him, mad enough to tie up; but, fortunately, there are dungeons here.'

Dantès whirled the stool round his head.

'All right, all right,' said the jailer; 'all right, since you will have it so. I will send word to the governor.'

'Very well,' returned Dantès, dropping the stool and sitting on it as if he were in reality mad. The jailer went out, and returned in an instant with a corporal and four soldiers.

'By the governor's orders,' said he, 'conduct the prisoner to the tier beneath.'

'To the dungeon, then,' said the corporal.

'Yes; we must put the madman with the madmen.' The soldiers seized Dantès, who followed passively.

He descended fifteen steps, and the door of a dungeon was opened, and he was thrust in. The door closed, and Dantès advanced with outstretched hands until he touched the wall; he then sat down in the corner until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. The jailer was right; Dantès wanted but little of being utterly mad.

'Better fare, if you pay for it, books, and leave to walk about.'

'I do not want books, I am satisfied with my food, and do not care to walk about; but I wish to see the governor.'

'If you worry me by repeating the same thing, I will not bring you any more to eat.'

'Well, then,' said Edmond, 'if you do not, I shall die of hunger—that is all.'

The jailer saw by his tone he would be happy to die; and as every prisoner is worth ten sous a day to his jailer, he replied in a more subdued tone.

'What you ask is impossible; but if you are very well behaved you will be allowed to walk about, and some day you will meet the governor, and if he chooses to reply, that is his affair.'

'But,' asked Dantès, 'how long shall I have to wait?'

'Ah, a month—six months—a year.'

'It is too long a time. I wish to see him at once.'

'Ah,' said the jailer, 'do not always brood over what is impossible, or you will be mad in a fortnight.'

'You think so?'

'Yes; we have an instance here; it was by always offering a million of francs to the governor for his liberty that an abbé became mad, who was in this chamber before you.'

'How long has he left it?'

'Two years.'

'Was he liberated, then?'

'No; he was put in a dungeon.'

'Listen!' said Dantès. 'I am not an abbé, I am not mad; perhaps I shall be, but at present, unfortunately, I am not. I will make you another offer.'

'What is that?'

'I do not offer you a million, because I have it not; but I will give you a hundred crowns if, the first time you go to Marseilles, you will seek out a young girl named Mercédès, at the Catalans, and give her two lines from me.'

'If I took them, and were detected, I should lose my place, which is worth two thousand francs a year; so that I should be a great fool to run such a risk for three hundred.'

'Be as quick as possible, I must be on the road in a quarter of an hour.'

'Tell your coachman to stop at the door.'

'You will present my excuses to the marquise and Mademoiselle Renée, whom I leave on such a day with great regret.'

'You will find them both here, and can make your farewells in person.'

'A thousand thanks—and now for the letter.'

The marquis rang, a servant entered.

'Say to the Comte de Salvieux that I would like to see him.'

'Now, then, go,' said the marquis.

'I shall be gone only a few moments.'

Villefort hastily quitted the apartment, but reflecting that the sight of the deputy procureur running through the streets would be enough to throw the whole city into confusion, he resumed his ordinary pace. At his door he perceived a figure in the shadow that seemed to wait for him. It was Mercédès, who, hearing no news of her lover, had come unobserved to inquire after him.

As Villefort drew near, she advanced and stood before him. Dantès had spoken of Mercédès, and Villefort instantly recognized her. Her beauty and high bearing surprised him, and when she inquired what had become of her lover, it seemed to him that she was the judge, and he the accused.

'The young man you speak of,' said Villefort abruptly, 'is a great criminal, and I can do nothing for him, mademoiselle.' Mercédès burst into tears, and, as Villefort strove to pass her, again addressed him.

'But, at least, tell me where he is, that I may know whether he is alive or dead,' said she. 'I do not know; he is no longer in my hands,' replied Villefort.

And desirous of putting an end to the interview, he pushed by her, and closed the door, as if to exclude the pain he felt. But remorse is not thus banished; like Virgil's wounded hero, he carried the arrow in his wound, and, arrived at the salon, Villefort uttered a sigh that was almost a sob, and sank into a chair.

Then the first pangs of an unending torture seized upon his heart. The man he sacrificed to his ambition, that innocent victim immolated on the altar of his father's faults, appeared to him pale and threatening, leading his affianced bride by the hand, and bringing with him remorse, not such as the ancients figured, furious and terrible, but that slow and consuming agony whose pangs are intensified from hour to hour up to the very moment of death. Then he

had a moment's hesitation. He had frequently called for capital punishment on criminals, and owing to his irresistible eloquence they had been condemned, and yet the slightest shadow of remorse had never clouded Villefort's brow, because they were guilty; at least, he believed so; but here was an innocent man whose happiness he had destroyed. In this case he was not the judge, but the executioner.

As he thus reflected, he felt the sensation we have described, and which had hitherto been unknown to him, arise in his bosom, and fill him with vague apprehensions. It is thus that a wounded man trembles instinctively at the approach of the finger to his wound until it be healed, but Villefort's was one of those that never close, or if they do, only close to reopen more agonizing than ever. If at this moment the sweet voice of Renée had sounded in his ears pleading for mercy, or the fair Mercédès had entered and said, 'In the name of God, I conjure you to restore me my affianced husband,' his cold and trembling hands would have signed his release; but no voice broke the stillness of the chamber, and the door was opened only by Villefort's valet, who came to tell him that the travelling carriage was in readiness.

Villefort rose, or rather sprang, from his chair, hastily opened one of the drawers of his desk, emptied all the gold it contained into his pocket, stood motionless an instant, his hand pressed to his head, muttered a few inarticulate sounds, and then, perceiving that his servant had placed his cloak on his shoulders, he sprang into the carriage, ordering the postilions to drive to M. de Saint-Méran's. The hapless Dantès was doomed.

As the marquis had promised, Villefort found the marquise and Renée in waiting. He started when he saw Renée, for he fancied she was again about to plead for Dantès. Alas, her emotions were wholly personal: she was thinking only of Villefort's departure.

She loved Villefort, and he left her at the moment he was about to become her husband. Villefort knew not when he should return, and Renée, far from pleading for Dantès, hated the man whose crime separated her from her lover. Meanwhile what of Mercédès? She had met Fernand at the corner of the Rue de la Loge; she had returned to the Catalans, and had despairingly cast herself on her couch. Fernand, kneeling by her side, took her hand, and covered it with kisses that Mercédès did not even feel. She passed the night thus. The lamp went out for want of oil, but she paid no heed to the darkness, and dawn

appeared not to perceive him. He touched him on the shoulder. Edmond started.

'Have you not slept?' said the jailer.

'I do not know,' replied Dantès. The jailer stared.

'Are you hungry?' continued he.

'I do not know.'

'Do you wish for anything?'

'I wish to see the governor.'

The jailer shrugged his shoulders and left the chamber.

Dantès followed him with his eyes, and stretched forth his hands towards the open door; but the door closed. All his emotion then burst forth; he cast himself on the ground, weeping bitterly, and asking himself what crime he had committed that he was thus punished.

The day passed thus; he scarcely tasted food, but walked round and round the cell like a wild beast in its cage. One thought in particular tormented him: namely, that during his journey hither he had sat so still, whereas he might, a dozen times, have plunged into the sea, and, thanks to his powers of swimming, for which he was famous, have gained the shore, concealed himself until the arrival of a Genoese or Spanish vessel, escaped to Spain or Italy, where Mercédès and his father could have joined him. He had no fears as to how he should live—good seamen are welcome everywhere. He spoke Italian like a Tuscan, and Spanish like a Castilian; he would have been free, and happy with Mercédès and his father, whereas he was now confined in the Château d'If, that impregnable fortress, ignorant of the future destiny of his father and Mercédès; and all this because he had trusted to Villefort's promise. The thought was maddening, and Dantès threw himself furiously down on his straw. The next morning at the same hour, the jailer came again.

'Well,' said the jailer, 'are you more reasonable today?'

Dantès made no reply.

'Come, cheer up; is there anything that I can do for you?'

'I wish to see the governor.'

'I have already told you it was impossible.'

'Why so?'

'Because it is against prison rules, and prisoners must not even ask for it.'

'What is allowed, then?'

Dantès made no resistance; he was like a man in a dream; he saw soldiers drawn up on the embankment; he knew vaguely that he was ascending a flight of steps; he was conscious that he passed through a door, and that the door closed behind him; but all this indistinctly as through a mist. He did not even see the ocean, that terrible barrier against freedom, which the prisoners look upon with utter despair.

They halted for a minute, during which he strove to collect his thoughts. He looked around; he was in a court surrounded by high walls; he heard the measured tread of sentinels, and as they passed before the light he saw the barrels of their muskets shine.

They waited upwards of ten minutes. Certain Dantès could not escape, the gendarmes released him. They seemed awaiting orders. The orders came.

'Where is the prisoner?' said a voice.

'Here,' replied the gendarmes.

'Let him follow me; I will take him to his cell.'

'Go!' said the gendarmes, thrusting Dantès forward.

The prisoner followed his guide, who led him into a room almost under ground, whose bare and reeking walls seemed as though impregnated with tears; a lamp placed on a stool illumined the apartment faintly, and showed Dantès the features of his conductor, an under-jailer, ill-clothed, and of sullen appearance.

'Here is your chamber for tonight,' said he. 'It is late, and the governor is asleep. Tomorrow, perhaps, he may change you. In the meantime there is bread, water, and fresh straw; and that is all a prisoner can wish for. Good-night.' And before Dantès could open his mouth—before he had noticed where the jailer placed his bread or the water—before he had glanced towards the corner where the straw was, the jailer disappeared, taking with him the lamp and closing the door, leaving stamped upon the prisoner's mind the dim reflection of the dripping walls of his dungeon.

Dantès was alone in darkness and in silence—cold as the shadows that he felt breathe on his burning forehead. With the first dawn of day the jailer returned, with orders to leave Dantès where he was. He found the prisoner in the same position, as if fixed there, his eyes swollen with weeping. He had passed the night standing, and without sleep. The jailer advanced; Dantès

came, but she knew not that it was day. Grief had made her blind to all but one object—that was Edmond.

'Ah, you are there,' said she, at length, turning towards Fernand.

'I have not quitted you since yesterday,' returned Fernand sorrowfully.

M. Morrel had not readily given up the fight. He had learned that Dantès had been taken to prison, and he had gone to all his friends, and the influential persons of the city; but the report was already in circulation that Dantès was arrested as a Bonapartist agent; and as the most sanguine looked upon any attempt of Napoleon to remount the throne as impossible, he met with nothing but refusal, and had returned home in despair, declaring that the matter was serious and that nothing more could be done.

Caderousse was equally restless and uneasy, but instead of seeking, like M. Morrel, to aid Dantès, he had shut himself up with two bottles of black currant brandy, in the hope of drowning reflection. But he did not succeed, and became too intoxicated to fetch any more drink, and yet not so intoxicated as to forget what had happened. With his elbows on the table he sat between the two empty bottles, while spectres danced in the light of the unsnuffed candle—spectres such as Hoffmann strews over his punch-drenched pages, like black, fantastic dust.

Danglars alone was content and joyous—he had got rid of an enemy and made his own situation on the *Pharaon* secure. Danglars was one of those men born with a pen behind the ear, and an inkstand in place of a heart. Everything with him was multiplication or subtraction. The life of a man was to him of far less value than a numeral, especially when, by taking it away, he could increase the sum total of his own desires. He went to bed at his usual hour, and slept in peace.

Villefort, after having received M. de Salvieux's letter, embraced Renée, kissed the marquise's hand, and shaken that of the marquis, started for Paris along the Aix road.

Old Dantès was dying with anxiety to know what had become of Edmond. But we know very well what had become of Edmond.

'There are only,' said the gendarme, 'a governor, a garrison, turnkeys, and good thick walls. Come, come, do not look so astonished, or you will make me think you are laughing at me in return for my good nature.'

Dantès pressed the gendarme's hand as though he would crush it.

'You think, then,' said he, 'that I am taken to the Château d'If to be imprisoned there?'

'It is probable; but there is no occasion to squeeze so hard.'

'Without any inquiry, without any formality?'

'All the formalities have been gone through; the inquiry is already made.'

'And so, in spite of M. de Villefort's promises?'

'I do not know what M. de Villefort promised you,' said the gendarme, 'but I know we are taking you to the Château d'If. But what are you doing? Help, comrades, help!'

By a rapid movement, which the gendarme's practised eye had perceived, Dantès sprang forward to precipitate himself into the sea; but four vigourous arms seized him as his feet quitted the bottom of the boat. He fell back cursing with rage.

'Good!' said the gendarme, placing his knee on his chest; 'this is the way you keep your word as a sailor! Believe soft-spoken gentlemen again! Hark ye, my friend, I have disobeyed my first order, but I will not disobey the second; and if you move, I will blow your brains out.' And he levelled his carbine at Dantès, who felt the muzzle against his temple.

For a moment the idea of struggling crossed his mind, and of so ending the unexpected evil that had overtaken him. But he bethought him of M. de Villefort's promise; and, besides, death in a boat from the hand of a gendarme seemed too terrible. He remained motionless, but gnashing his teeth and wringing his hands with fury.

At this moment the boat came to a landing with a violent shock. One of the sailors leaped on shore, a cord creaked as it ran through a pulley, and Dantès guessed they were at the end of the voyage, and that they were mooring the boat.

His guards, taking him by the arms and coat-collar, forced him to rise, and dragged him towards the steps that lead to the gate of the fortress, while the police officer carrying a musket with fixed bayonet followed behind.

light. Dantès turned and perceived that they had got out to sea. While he had been absorbed in thought, they had shipped their oars and hoisted sail; the boat was now moving with the wind.

In spite of his repugnance to address the guards, Dantès turned to the nearest gendarme, and taking his hand,

'Comrade,' said he, 'I adjure you, as a Christian and a soldier, to tell me where we are going. I am Captain Dantès, a loyal Frenchman, thought accused of treason; tell me where you are conducting me, and I promise you on my honour I will submit to my fate.'

The gendarme looked irresolutely at his companion, who returned for answer a sign that said, 'I see no great harm in telling him now,' and the gendarme replied:

'You are a native of Marseilles, and a sailor, and yet you do not know where you are going?'

'On my honour, I have no idea.'

'Have you no idea whatever?'

'None at all.'

'That is impossible.'

'I swear to you it is true. Tell me, I entreat.'

'But my orders.'

'Your orders do not forbid your telling me what I must know in ten minutes, in half an hour, or an hour. You see I cannot escape, even if I intended.'

'Unless you are blind, or have never been outside the harbour, you must know.'

'I do not.'

'Look round you then.' Dantès rose and looked forward, when he saw rise within a hundred yards of him the black and frowning rock on which stands the Château d'If. This gloomy fortress, which has for more than three hundred years furnished food for so many wild legends, seemed to Dantès like a scaffold to a malefactor.

'The Château d'If?' cried he, 'what are we going there for?'

The gendarme smiled.

'I am not going there to be imprisoned,' said Dantès; 'it is only used for political prisoners. I have committed no crime. Are there any magistrates or judges at the Château d'If?'

Chapter X

The King's Closet at the Tuileries

We will leave Villefort on the road to Paris, travelling—thanks to trebled fees—with all speed, and passing through two or three apartments, enter at the Tuileries the little room with the arched window, so well known as having been the favourite closet of Napoleon and Louis XVIII., and now of Louis Philippe.

There, seated before a walnut table he had brought with him from Hartwell, and to which, from one of those fancies not uncommon to great people, he was particularly attached, the king, Louis XVIII., was carelessly listening to a man of fifty or fifty-two years of age, with gray hair, aristocratic bearing, and exceedingly gentlemanly attire, and meanwhile making a marginal note in a volume of Gryphius's rather inaccurate, but much sought-after, edition of Horace—a work which was much indebted to the sagacious observations of the philosophical monarch.

'You say, sir— ' said the king.

'That I am exceedingly disquieted, sire.'

'Really, have you had a vision of the seven fat kine and the seven lean kine?'

'No, sire, for that would only betoken for us seven years of plenty and seven years of scarcity; and with a king as full of foresight as your majesty, scarcity is not a thing to be feared.'

'Then of what other scourge are you afraid, my dear Blacas?'

'Sire, I have every reason to believe that a storm is brewing in the south.'

'Well, my dear duke,' replied Louis XVIII., 'I think you are wrongly informed, and know positively that, on the contrary, it is very fine weather in that direction.' Man of ability as he was, Louis XVIII. liked a pleasant jest.

'Sire,' continued M. de Blacas, 'if it only be to reassure a faithful servant, will your majesty send into Languedoc, Provence, and Dauphiné, trusty men, who will bring you back a faithful report as to the feeling in these three provinces?'

'*Canimus surdis*,' replied the king, continuing the annotations in his Horace.

'Sire,' replied the courtier, laughing, in order that he might seem to comprehend the quotation, 'your majesty may be perfectly right in relying on the good feeling of France, but I fear I am not altogether wrong in dreading some desperate attempt.'

'By whom?'

'By Bonaparte, or, at least, by his adherents.'

'My dear Blacas,' said the king, 'you with your alarms prevent me from working.'

'And you, sire, prevent me from sleeping with your security.'

'Wait, my dear sir, wait a moment; for I have such a delightful note on the *Pastor quum traheret*—wait, and I will listen to you afterwards.'

There was a brief pause, during which Louis XVIII. wrote, in a hand as small as possible, another note on the margin of his Horace, and then looking at the duke with the air of a man who thinks he has an idea of his own, while he is only commenting upon the idea of another, said:

'Go on, my dear duke, go on—I listen.'

'Sire,' said Blacas, who had for a moment the hope of sacrificing Villefort to his own profit, 'I am compelled to tell you that these are not mere rumours destitute of foundation which thus disquiet me; but a serious-minded man, deserving all my confidence, and charged by me to watch over the south' (the duke hesitated as he pronounced these words), 'has arrived by post to tell me that a great peril threatens the king, and so I hastened to you, sire.'

'*Mala ducis avi domum*,' continued Louis XVIII., still annotating.

'Does your majesty wish me to drop the subject?'

'By no means, my dear duke; but just stretch out your hand.'

'Which?'

'Whichever you please—there to the left.'

'Here, sire?'

'I tell you to the left, and you are looking to the right; I mean on my left—yes, there. You will find yesterday's report of the minister of police. But here is M.

boat, the chain that closes the mouth of the port was lowered and in a second they were, as Dantès knew, in the Frioul and outside the inner harbour.

The prisoner's first feeling was of joy at again breathing the pure air—for air is freedom; but he soon sighed, for he passed before La Réserve, where he had that morning been so happy, and now through the open windows came the laughter and revelry of a ball. Dantès folded his hands, raised his eyes to heaven, and prayed fervently. The boat continued her voyage. They had passed the Tête de Mort, were now off the Anse du Pharo, and about to double the battery. This manœuvre was incomprehensible to Dantès.

'Whither are you taking me?' asked he.

'You will soon know.'

'But still— '

'We are forbidden to give you any explanation.' Dantès, trained in discipline, knew that nothing would be more absurd than to question subordinates, who were forbidden to reply; and so he remained silent.

The most vague and wild thoughts passed through his mind. The boat they were in could not make a long voyage; there was no vessel at anchor outside the harbour; he thought, perhaps, they were going to leave him on some distant point. He was not bound, nor had they made any attempt to handcuff him; this seemed a good augury. Besides, had not the deputy, who had been so kind to him, told him that provided he did not pronounce the dreaded name of Noirtier, he had nothing to apprehend? Had not Villefort in his presence destroyed the fatal letter, the only proof against him?

He waited silently, striving to pierce through the darkness.

They had left the Ile Ratonneau, where the lighthouse stood, on the right, and were now opposite the Point des Catalans. It seemed to the prisoner that he could distinguish a feminine form on the beach, for it was there Mercédès dwelt. How was it that a presentiment did not warn Mercédès that her lover was within three hundred yards of her?

One light alone was visible; and Dantès saw that it came from Mercédès' chamber. Mercédès was the only one awake in the whole settlement. A loud cry could be heard by her. But pride restrained him and he did not utter it. What would his guards think if they heard him shout like a madman?

He remained silent, his eyes fixed upon the light; the boat went on, but the prisoner thought only of Mercédès. An intervening elevation of land hid the