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"THE MINISTER OF POLICE"

By HENRY MOUNTJOY

CHAPTER VI (Continued).

De Joyeuse, ghastly with anger and sweating, was preparing to rise.

"On your knees."

De Joyeuse, under that voice which pressed on him like a hand, was sinking back on his knees, when like a thunderclap came an incident that struck the actors and spectators of this little comedy motionless as people of stone.

The door swung open and a lackey's voice announced "Monsieur de Maupeou."

The vice chancellor of France stood for a moment staring at the extraordinary scene before him. He was a gloomy faced individual, and his great wig and sober attire did not detract from the expression on his face.

"Why," cried the baroness, who had met him once at a reception, "'tis Monsieur de Maupeou! Pray, Monsieur, do not think us mad; we are only rehearsing a little comedy. Do not move," to the trio on the floor; "Monsieur de Maupeou will not mind our finishing the rehearsal. Monsieur de Sartines is our stage manager. Monsieur de Sartines, Madame d'Harlancourt is shifting her position."

De Sartines turned his back on De Maupeou after having bowed to him, and faced the actors.

His glance was quite enough to keep them as they were, even if their amour propre had not urged them to keep up before De Maupeou the pretense of a rehearsal.

They smiled.

"And this play?" said De Maupeou, taking his seat on the fauteuil indicated by De Richelieu.

"'Tis called the Rat, the Cat, and the Corn. I am the miller's wife, and these are the rat and the cats. Monsieur de Sartines is the stage manager. Monsieur de Richelieu possessed the manuscript, but he has lost it, so we are rehearsing from memory."

"Madame," said De Sartines in a humble voice, "shall we not put off our little rehearsal till a more favorable opportunity?"

"Why, yes, Monsieur, after the rat and the cats have said once more their little piece. Now, attention. Place your hands together so, and say after me once again the line:

"'Nous sommes rats, chats, fats.'"

"Nous sommes rats, chats, fats," repeated the actors, with a frightful assumption of gayety.

"And we humbly beg your pardon," went on the instructress.

"And we humbly beg your pardon."

"Right. Now you may arise. Monsieur de Sartines."

"Yes, Madame."

"My carriage. And remember that you are coming to supper with me tonight in the Rue Coq Heron, at eight precisely."

De Sartines, taken back by this invitation which was also a command, could only bow.

"Yes, Madame."

She turned to Madame de Stenlis and the comtesse.

"Ladies, you will be with me this evening at eight punctually."

They glanced at De Sartines, then they bowed.

"And you, too, Monsieur," said she, turning to De Joyeuse.

He bowed.

Then she turned to De Maupeou, and De Sartines felt sick at heart.

"Monsieur de Maupeou, you, too, are invited. Will you not make one of us?"

"I shall be charmed," replied De Maupeou, who scented something strange in all this.

"You will, I hope. My carriage, de Sartines."

De Richelieu himself called for her carriage, and De Sartines escorted her to it.

"Madame," said he at the carriage door, "I pray you to think over everything in your mind. The play of the rat, the cat, and the corn is very amusing. What is the charge for the copyright and the manuscript?"

"Monsieur," she replied, "that is the price of my jewels. We shall see about the price of the play after it has been performed."

The carriage drove away, and he returned to the reception room, half broken with anxiety and feeling as though he were inclosed by a net.

De Joyeuse and the two women were making their adieus to De Richelieu.

"Good-by, De Sartines, till this evening," said Madame de Stenlis as she left.

"Till this evening," said Madame d'Harlancourt.

"Till this evening, dear De Sartines," said De Joyeuse.

"Till this evening," replied De Sartines, bowing. He read in their faces, their voices, and their manner the hint of what they guessed—that De Sartines was to be the first protagonist in madame's little comedy, and that De Sartines would have at her hands a sufficiently lively time; not one of them would not have given the rags of his or her reputation to see the minister of police in the dust, and he knew it.

De Maupeou, who had called to see De Richelieu relative, so he said, to the question of a suit which was pending at the courts and who had finished speaking to him on the matter, now turned to go.

"Till this evening, Monsieur de Sartines."

De Sartines bowed as he left the room. Then when the marechal and the minister found themselves alone, De Sartines turned savagely on the duc.

"What is this?"

"Ma foi, I don't know; but madame seems to have turned the tables very completely on you, my dear minister."

"Cordieu! turned the tables upon me! I should think so. You hev been robbed."

De Richelieu clapped his hands on his pocket.

"You have been robbed of that cursed contract. She has possession of it; she has made a copy of it; she holds it like a sword, ventre Dieu; and she has the will to use it.

"Ciel!" cried Richelieu, the picture of aghastness, striking himself on the forehead as he spoke. "I might have known when she said that word 'Porcheron!' I, fancied she had only got wind of the thing and was holding you in check by the name. But it is impossible. The paper is secreted in the drawer of my bureau and no one ever is admitted to the library. Ah! Ah!"

"What?" asked De Sartines, almost startled, at the old marechal's expression.

"I see it all now."

"Yes, yes?"

"I know the thief!"

"Yes, yes?"

"The only person possible. Armand de Lussac. He alone has had access to my library. He came the other day on a visit—scamp, traitor! He said he was tired of Paris and wanted a change. Ah, mon Dieu! to think that I have been robbed by a kinsman!"

"Well, Monsieur, your kinsman is safe in the Bastile. If he has taken the thing, then he must have passed it on to this infernal woman. The course before you is clear.

"Yes?"

"You must visit De Lussac in the Bastile and exert your power upon him. You must make him write a letter to madame ordering her to deliver up to you the paper that has been stolen from you."

"Ma foi!" said Richelieu, "that is not a bad idea. One can but try. Of course, he will deny it."

"All the same, you must try. Threaten him with lifelong imprisonment if he does not do as you dictate, and to seal the matter show him these papers." De Sartines took a packet from his pocket. "They are the papers of the Society of Midi, which I found in the orangne tree tub in his courtyard. When he sees them he will know he is lost unless he surrenders."

De Richelieu took the papers and placed them in his pocket.

"There is one thing," said he. "This visit must be private; no one must know that I have made it. I refuse to be implicated further in this affair. To have it said that Monsieur de Richelieu visited his kinsman in the Bastile; to have it said that——"

"Set your mind at rest," replied De Sartines. "I will give you an order, armed with which you will be admitted without question, or examination; you can manage with the brim of your hat and your cloak held to your eyes that no one will see your face. You consent?"

"Ma foi!" replied Richelieu, "yes. But one thing troubles me."

"What is that?"

"De Maupeou's arrival here to-day. He is your enemy."

"He is."

"Well, he came to speak to me about some law business. That was only a pretext; he had nothing important to say. Besides all Paris thinks that I am at Versailles. No, I am sure that woman sent him a secret hint to come here, that he would see something that would interest him."

"Possibly."

"She has invited him to her home this evening, Comte; this means mischief, and if I were you, I should——"

"Yes?"

"Buy her or imprison her."

De Sartines made no reply. He could not explain that he had attempted to buy her and that imprisonment was totally out of the question.

CHAPTER VII.

The Spirit of the Bastile.

DE LUSSAC, after that glance, which showed him the battlement wall and the silhouette of the passing sentry, sat for a whigle, his face buried in his hands. One might be tempted to say that despair does not exist except in a mind diseased, unless perhaps as a passing phase, as now in the case of De Lussac. De Lussac for a moment felt and measured despair. For a moment only, and then his mind returned to him.

What brought him back to balance was chiefly the thought that his position was of his own making, and that there was a certain justice in his imprisonment. He had matched himself against society as represented by De Sartines, and the game had gone against him. It was useless to pule and complain; it was unmanly. Then youth, that giant, came to his assistance. "Courage," said youth; "the game is not lost yet. Men have escaped from prisons worse than this. A hundred things may happen. Be prepared."

He rose to his fet and paced the floor of his cell. The light was now so dim that he could scarcely distinguish the table, the chair, and the bed; but he did not think of this. Prisonless, his mind was wandering far and wide and like a bird seeking a resting place, some point of hope.

He remembered, now, that Madame Linden was in full possession of the facts of his case; though she knew nothing of his imprisonment she knew of his danger; she was in possession of De Sartines' secret and she would certainly use that knowledge to help him—only, perhaps, to bring about her own ruin!

This thought made him forget all things else, even his own position. Ah! if she were to fall into the trap, become entangled in the wheels of this infernal machine that held him. And he would never know. If his imprisonment were to last till his death, he would never know.

Maddened by this thought, he broke out, cursing himself, cursing De Fleury, the men he had sought to rescue, De Sartines and the world. Then he became calm again; his mind refused to dwell on so frightful an idea. He would escape; other men had escaped from prisons worse than this.

He began to form plans wild enough and senseless enough. He would bribe the turnkey, forgetting that to leave the Bastile he would have to pass the guard at the main door, the guard at the inner gate, and the guard at the drawbridge. He would break the bars of the window and lower himself by means of his sheets torn up and twisted into ropes; forgeting that if he succeeded he would find himself in the inner courtyard, hopeless to escape from as the tomb.

Engaged in these thoughts, he was suddenly brought back to reality by the sound of a key in the lock of the cell door; a bolt was shot back, the door opened, and his jailer appeared, lamp in hand.

A man followed the jailer, carrying a tray on which was the prisoner's supper and the paper, pen and ink with which every prisoner was supplied, so that he might put in writing his complaints to the governor.

"I will be back in an hour for the lamp," said the jailer.

"For the lamp!"

"Ma foi, yes. Those are the regulations. You don't want more than an hour for your supper."

"Heavens!" said De Lussac. "They have deprived me of liberty, and they are now going to deprive me of light?"

"I know nothing of your liberty," said the jailer; "I only know the regulations." He went out and shut the door.

De Lussac turned to the food on the table. It consisted of a stew, some bread, and half a bottle of wine. The idea of food revolted him, still, he knew that not to eat was perhaps to fail if a sudden call came upon his energies. He sat down to the table.

There was something human about the food and the wine in this inhuman place, this nightmare of stone.

As he sat eating, a slight sound attracted his attention and glancing on the floor he saw a rat. An old gray rat which had slipped into the cell through some hole in the masonry, attracted, perhaps, by the smell of the food.

He glanced at it, terrified by the thought that he would find himself alone in the darkness with such company as this. His imagination painted swarms of rats running over him, perhaps attacking him. He was about to push his chair away from the table when the rat, whose bright eyes were now fixed on him, drew closer and then sat up on its haunches like a dog.

It was begging for food, just as a poodle begs, and De Lussac stared at it in astonishment without moving. The rat kept its position for a moment and then of a sudden it turned a complete somersault. Three times it did this before sitting up again to beg.

It was a performing rat, the pet, perhaps the friend, of some unhappy prisoner now vanished.

He threw a piece of meat from the stew, and the rat whisked away with it beneath the bed. Then, unable to eat any more, he sat with his elbows on the table till the key sounded again in the lock and the jailer entered.

"Well," said the man as he removed the things, "you've made small use of your pen and paper."

De Lussac started. He had little hope of any appeal made to the governor.

"I will use them to-morrow," he said. "Tell me, was this cell inhabited before I came here?"

"Till yesterday."

"The prisoner was liberated?"

"No, Monsieur; he died."

"Ah, he died! Who was he, then, and how long was he here?"

The man laughed; he was in a good humor, for the liberality of De Lussac in paying for the pen, ink and paper, and the bottle of wine he had cracked on the strength of the louis, warmed his heart toward the prisoner.

"Now you are asking questions! Who was he? Ma foi, he was the Marquis de Viverolles, and he came here before my time. I was sorry to lose him. No matter; 'tis the way we must all go."

The Marquis de Viverolles! De Lussac had heard of him in his youth as the handsomest and wittiest man in France, who suddenly became extinguished in the last years of the reign of the Grand Monarch, just as Fouquet had become extinguished in the first years of that illustrious reign. The man who had graced everything that he touched, charmed all whom he knew, lent his wit to so many men, his heart to so many women, his purse to so many friends, and his genius—to a rat!

The spirit of the Bastile lay in that page of unwritten history.

Consumed by the mournfulness of it and feeling in it a pointer of his own fate, De Lussac, scarcely answering the "good night" of his jailer, flung himself on his bed.

After a while the absolute blackness of the cell was broken by a ray of light. The moon had risen and a beam showed up the bars of the window space.

As the light broke the darkness, a faint sound came from the floor of the cell. It was the friend of the Marquis de Viverolles picking up the crumbs that had fallen from the table.

De Lussac, as he lay listening and watching the beam upon the wall, instead of giving himself over to despair, continued to exercise his mind on plans for escape.

Nothing could seem more hopeless, yet he showed his philosophy by clinging to hope.

"Come," he said to himself, "I have determined to leave this place. If I cannot leave it in the body, I shall leave it in the spirit by dying. Well, then, let me aim first at my bodily release. Let me be calm, strong and watchful. To be watchful, I must conciliate my jailer and keep my eyes open for any chance; to be strong I must eat, and to be calm I must sleep.

"Let me, then, sleep; it is the first step to that plan which I have not yet formed but which will come."

He turned on his side, but sleep, which comes to children more readily than to philosophers, held aloof from him for a while. Then, suddenly, the exhaustion caused by the excitement of the day fell on him like a cloak. He slept, and when he woke he found the jailer entering his cell and daylight shining through the high window.

His first thoughts on wakening and recognizing the place where he was, were the thoughts upon which he had fallen asleep.

The jailer, used to the vagaries of new prisoners, was surprised at the cheerful face of his new charge.

"Well," said he, "you seem to have slept. Here is a jug of water for you, and you shall have some coffee in an hour's time. We don't starve our people here. And for dinner you can have what you please to pay for."

"What I please to pay for?" asked De Lussac, who did not know the truth that La Bastile was in reality a vast and formidable hotel, of which the governor was the keeper.

"Certainly."

"Well, then," said De Lussac, "I will have for dinner—my release."

The man laughed, and De Lussac felt he had gained a point.

"I will even pay you a hundred thousand francs for that same dinner," went on the comte. "Two hundred—three hundred. My rent-roll is three hundred thousand francs—well, I will give a year's rent for that which will cost you nothing."

"You are like the rest of them," replied the man, placing the pitcher of fresh water on the table. "All promises. One would think I had only to open the door and say, 'Monsieur What's-your-name, walk out.'"

He left the cell, shutting the door behind him and locking it, and De Lussac lay down on his bed again.

After a while he rose up, drew the table beneath the window space, stood on the table and, springing up, clung to the window bars. He saw again the battlemented wall and against the sky-line the form of a sentry passing along it, just as he had seen a passing sentry on the evening before. The sight depressed him. He began to recognize that in the Bastile the guardianship of prisoners had been reduced to a science. Drawing the table back to its place, he sat down on his bed again, this time with his chin between his hands.

"All this is a system," said he, "and there is no system without some flaw. Let me find the flaw. These jailers of mine have been reduced from living and thinking men to automata; surely that is a point for a mind alive and fresh to work upon."

Two hours passed, and then the jailer reappeared with the coffee and roll which formed the dejeuner of the Bastile; dinner was served at two o'clock.

"What time is it?" asked De Lussac as he sat down at the table.

"Time?" said the man. "We have no need for time here. It's time for your coffee. Time! Ma foi, if you once begin about that, you will become like that merry gentleman down the passage, who sings all day. The clock with us is the dejeuner hour, the dinner hour and the supper hour—a very good timepiece, too." He laughed as he went out.

De Lussac, with a sinking feeling at his heart, drank his coffee and crumbled his roll. As he did so he heard something whisk on the floor. It was the rat. Hastily he flung a piece of the roll and the rat vanished with it. The thing and its antics stirred him almost to terror.

Then, to divert his thoughts, he took the pen, ink and paper and began to write his letter to the governor.

It was a short letter, simply asking for an interview, and having folded the sheet he fastened it with a wafer and directed it. Then he sat down again on the side of his bed. It was at this moment, perhaps, that he first felt the terrible sensation, almost impossible to put in words, the feeling that time has stopped—that the hour is no longer a boat taking us to any destination.

When the jailer appeared at two, bearing the prisoner's dinner, he found De Lussac seated on the side of his bed, staring vacantly before him.

He refused the food. He did not even refer to the letter which was lying on the table; he seemed like a man dazed by a blow. Philosophy, that toy of the mind destroyed at once by grief or pain, was no longer with this unfortunate gentleman. La Bastile, that had at last got him firmly in her grip. La Bastile, that living pain made from dead stone, that despair embodied in masonry, had taken his mind prisoner as well as his body.

The jailer withdrew, grumbling to himself. He knew the symptoms and he expected trouble. At three o'clock when he brought the prisoner a change of linen, De Lussac was no longer seated on the bed; he was pacing the cell feverishly. His face was white, and he turned such a ferocious glance on his visitor that the man hastily withdrew.

"Never mind," said he; "a little starvation will bring him to his senses. We shall see what he has to say at supper-time."

For half an hour after the jailer left him De Lussac continued pacing the floor. Then, suddenly, he broke out, shouting, raving, beating upon the door with his fists, furious like a trapped animal. He seemed fighting and struggling something; he was struggling with La Bastile.

The viewless one, whose integuments were the walls and the doors, whose jewelry was the locks, the chains and the bars, was at last at grips with him. He had said to himself, "Courage! I will disregard her. I will escape from her. If I cannot leave her in the body, I will kill myself and free my soul."

She had replied, "It is your soul I want. Only men of spirit kill themselves; I will take your spirit away. Men do not kill themselves here; I kill their spirits. They make friends of rats. They are brave, they threaten me with suicide, but they live to forget all that, and they die laughing and singing like that merry gentleman down the corridor."

Then he struck her and she struck him, using only his own force in returning the blow. He shouted at her, and she shouted back in echoes of his own voice. He wrestled with her, and she flung him on the bed.

Spent, foaming at the mouth, haggard and dulled, he lay while she stood over him—towers and battlements—armed, silent and victorious. She had reduced him without killing him. That was her victory. It would go on like this, the struggle of the soul against her and her struggle against the soul, breaking the spirit, debasing the man till he began to play with rats or sing songs to her like the merry gentleman down the corridor.

His fury had expended itself and he was now calm; his mind cleared, and deep shame overcame him for the moment. He recognized with horror that he had been acting like a wild beast drunk with captivity.

He sat up on the bed, and scarcely had he done so when a noise came from the corridor outside the cell; the bolts shot back, the door opened, and the jailer appeared.

The man looked at De Lussac for a moment.

"You are better, I see. That is well, for there is a visitor for you."

De Lussac sprang to his feet as a man, wearing a dark cloak and a broad-brimmed hat, entered the cell. The man's face was invisible, for he held a fold of the cloak over it; nothing but the eyes, bright and piercing, could be seen beneath the shadow of the hat-brim.

For a moment De Lussac, as he glanced at this sinister figure, fancied that this was some emissary of the king or De Sartines come to dispatch him; only for a moment. The unknown, without lowering his cloak, said, speaking to the jailer: "Leave us and close the door without locking it. Take your post at the end of the corridor and wait for me there."

The jailer went out and closed the door; the cloak fell from the face of the unknown, and De Lussac found himself fronting his kinsman, the Duc de Richelieu.

"Well, Monsieur," said the duc, taking off his hat and flinging it on the table while he let the cloak slip from his shoulders, "this is a nice position in which you have placed yourself!"

De Lussac could not speak for a moment. He stood with his hand grasping the back of the chair, while the duc, placing the cloak on the table beside the hat, continued: "A conspirator against the state, a De Lussac, a cousin of mine, and a robber. Cordieu, Monsieur, I dread to inquire further into your doings for fear of what I may find."

The sight of the duc and these words were like wine to De Lussac. His intellect, made clear by his past fury was now like the atmosphere purged by a storm. Fortunately for himself, he had eaten nothing that day but a morsel of bread; in a second thoughts passed through his mind that in ordinary circumstances would have taken a minute in their flight. He recognized that fate had at last given him his chance, and he took it.

"Monsieur," said he, "if you will take your seat on the side of that bed, I will take this chair; then we can converse the more easily. To what do you refer?"

"To what do I refer?" replied the marechal, taking his seat on the side of the bed. "I refer to your conduct, Monsieur."

"You called me a robber."

"And I call you it again. You came to my house. I offered you hospitality; you opened my bureau; you or the woman you know of abstracted a private paper—"

"Stay, Monsieur. Do you refer to Madame Linden?"

"I do."

"How is she implicated in this matter?"

"How? She called upon me last night; that is how. She took advantage of my absence from the room—I don't know how. At all events, the thing is gone. Between you, you have done this act. Don't speak. I did not come here to argue, but to dictate. That document must be returned."

"And if it is not returned?"

"Then, Monsieur, you are a prisoner for life. Oh, I know you say to yourself, 'I am the Comte de Lussac. I have powerful friends; they will free me.' Well, I can only reply, documents have been discovered in your house of such a nature that, should we use them against you—well, you are hopelessly lost."

"Documents! What documents?"

The marechal laughed.

"You shall see them with your own eyes."

He placed his hand in his pocket and produced a small bundle of papers. De Lussac instantly recognized the papers of the Society of the Midi. He started in his chair and his face flushed despite himself.

"Well," said De Richelieu, exhibiting the bundle, "what do you say to that? Look; examine them. Are they genuine? What do you say to that?"

"Monsieur," said De Lussac, taking the papers in his hand and glancing at them, "I have only one thing to say—it seems I have been robbed just as you have been robbed, and before God I would sooner be robbed of documents like these than of a document like that, in which an infamous king and an infamous minister conspire to rob the people of their food. By a miraculous chance these documents have returned to me. Monsieur, cannot you see the hand of God in that? You cannot? Then feel it!"

In a moment De Richelieu was on his back upon the bed, with De Lussac on top of him.

The attack was so sudden and unexpected that the marechal had no time to cry out before the comte's thumb, pressing on his thyroid cartilage, made outcry impossible.

"Monsieur," said De Lussac, "I do not wish to kill you, but should it be needful I will do so."

With his free hand he began to unloose De Richelieu's scarf so as to gag him with it. Then he saw that it was unnecessary. The marechal had lost consciousness; he looked as though he were dying. He felt horrified, but he had no time to palter with his feelings. He picked the precious packet of documents from the floor and thrust it into his pocket, put on the marechal's belt and sword, put on the hat, put on the cloak, opened the cell door, raised the cloak to his face and left the cell, closing the door behind him.

The jailer was leaning against the wall at the end of the corridor. Seeing the man in the cloak, he came forward and locked and barred the cell door. He saw no difference between the man he had let into the cell and the man who had come out; there was only a short inch of difference between the two. He turned the key in the lock and slid the bolts.

As he did this a faint and stifled cry came from the cell. De Lussac's heart scarcely changed its rhythm; he was beyond emotion. If the jailer attempted to open the door he would kill the man with the sword beside him; he would try to reach the carriage which he knew must be in waiting; failing in that, he would fight his way, sword in hand, as far as possible toward freedom.

The jailer paused for a moment with the keys in his hand, then he led the way from the cell along the corridor.

They had reached the heavy door leading to the staircase when muffled cries and the sound of some one beating on a door came after them.

"There he goes," said the turnkey. "He's in his tantrums again. He'll be breaking his furniture next. They generally do. Allow me, Monseigneur."

He opened the door leading to the stairs. De Lussac passed through, the man closed and locked the door and then led the way downward. As De Lussac followed, his heart, till now calm, became furiously alive; each downward step was an agony. What formalities were there still to be gone through? Would he have to enter the governor's room? Would the guards at the main door ask to see the permit that doubtless De Richelieu had shown them? He knew that De Richelieu must have arrived in a carriage and that the carriage would be waiting. Would De Richelieu's coachman fail to recognize him? Had De Richelieu brought one of his dogs with him? Had he by any chance brought a companion?

They reached the corridor below and the jailer began to unlock the great door leading to the corridor on which was situated the chamber of audience. The door opened slowly on its well-oiled hinges, and when they had passed through it closed with a sucking sound as though La Bastile were catching her breath back with a sob at the escape of this victim.

But they were not free of her yet.

As they approached the chamber of audience a bar suddenly shot out, blocking their way. It was the pike of the Swiss on guard at the door of the room. The jailer, producing a paper from his belt, handed it to the man, who read it, raised his pike and allowed them to pass on.

Another ponderous door was opened; they passed through, and there at the end of the corridor De Lussac saw the sunlight shinning through the open main door, and at the steps a carriage drawn up and evidently waiting for De Richelieu.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY.

THREE FAMOUS EXPLORERS.

SHACKLETON, PEARY, AND AMUNDSEN.

This unusual picture was taken in Philadelphia, and shows the intrepid men who discovered the North and South Poles, together with Sir Robert Shackleton, of Antarctic fame, in good humor and good company.