

CHAPTER 5

Number 34

Edmond was hurried down steep stone steps into a cell. Dampness and evil odors surrounded him. By the light of the jailor's lantern he saw that the cell contained a chair, a table, a pail, and a cot with straw and a blanket thrown on top. While one jailor brought in some bread and a jug of water, another stood guard. But it was not necessary, for Edmond was so bewildered by what was happening to him that he was too weak to move and too dazed to even breathe. When the jailors left and he heard the iron door

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

clang shut, he sank to the floor where he had been standing.

The next morning, Edmond's jailor found him still hunched over on the stone floor. He had not eaten or drunk or slept. When the jailor poked him, the spell of confusion broke at last, and Edmond wept wildly.

When the jailor had gone, Edmond screamed at his closed door, demanding to know what crime he had committed. After a time, he sank into a despairing heap and stared at the floor again.

When his jailor returned and saw that he had not eaten, he spoke encouragingly to him. The jailor was paid according to the number of prisoners he had to care for. If Edmond should die of starvation, the jailor's salary would be reduced. "You must keep up your strength," he told Edmond. "Perhaps in a year or two they will let you appeal your sentence. Others have been permitted to do so."

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

“A year or two!” Edmond was shocked. “I must speak to Monsieur Villefort *now*. Listen, please. I will pay you to take a message to him. And another one to a young girl called Mercedes in Marseilles.”

The jailor laughed loudly. “I would be fired if I were caught carrying messages for prisoners,” he explained. “You could not pay me enough to make me endanger my job. There is one prisoner here, a mad priest, who frequently offers me a million francs to help him.”

Now Edmond stood up, showing himself to be a strong young man. He said in a quiet but positive manner, “If you do not help me, one time when you enter this cell, I will be behind the door. I will seize you and choke the life out of you.”

At this, the jailor ran from the cell. He returned a few minutes later with six soldiers, all armed with guns. The soldiers forced

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

Edmond from the cell and thrust him into a dungeon at the end of a dark corridor. There Edmond closed his eyes and wondered if he were going mad.

The days and nights passed slowly for Edmond. His jailors hardly spoke to him, and they never used his name. He was known simply as "Number 34," for that was the number of his dungeon. Starved for conversation, Edmond begged his jailor for a few words. But the man merely shook his head "no," put down the day's meal, and did not even glance at Edmond. Edmond talked out loud to himself constantly. Once, he had pitied galley-slaves, but now he saw that they had some happiness. At least they breathed the sea air, and they had one another for companionship. Edmond had nothing.

A year passed this way, and Edmond stopped trying to keep track of the date. He begged his jailors to let him go for a walk, to

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

give him books, anything to pass the time. But his pleas were refused. Then he began to think about religion and pleaded with his jailor to permit him to see the prisoner they called "the mad priest." He is still a man of the church, thought Edmond, and he will guide me in my prayers for release. But this visit was never permitted.

Another year passed, and Edmond grew furious with his lot in life. He stopped praying and began to curse everyone who might have acted to imprison him. But he was so uneducated and so inexperienced in wordly matters that he could not imagine who would have wanted to harm him. Being young, he did not have many memories, so his boredom with his own thoughts became more intense.

As the years passed, four... six... eight... ten, Edmond feared he was going mad. Sometime in his twelfth year, Edmond came to a decision. "I wish to die," he said aloud. "I

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

swear that I shall never eat or drink again." When his dinner was brought that evening, Edmond threw it out the small, barred window into the sea. He was intent on keeping his jailor from knowing what was happening, for he feared the prison authorities might order him fed by force. For a whole week he threw out his food and drink, but the lack of water quickly sickened him. As Edmond grew weaker and weaker, it was all he could do to totter to the window and empty out his dish and mug. His jailor saw his weakness and thought he must be wasting away from some terrible illness.

Finally one evening Edmond felt sure his end was near. He was almost happy as he drifted into a kind of twilight of half-sleeping and half-waking. Silently he blessed his father and Mercedes. His breathing grew more and more shallow. In another hour, the suffering and the life of Number 34 would be over.

CHAPTER 6

Scrape . . . Scrape . . . Scrape

As Edmond lay dying on his cot, he heard a noise—a constant scraping. His dungeon was infested with rats and large bugs, but this scraping was different from any of their sounds. Edmond raised his head weakly and listened harder. The sound was like a large claw scraping on the stone wall near his cot.

His heart gave a great lurch as he realized that some prisoner was attempting to escape! The thought of someone making his way to freedom made Edmond feel dizzy. He told himself that his weakness was making him

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

hear things. But the sound continued. It cannot be a workman for the prison, Edmond reasoned, because it is the middle of the night.

His starving body then caused him to fall into a disturbed sleep.

He awoke in the morning angry with himself. Perhaps some fellow sufferer was trying to signal him and he had not heard. When the jailor brought his breakfast, Edmond gobbled it up. His desire for death had vanished. Now his one thought was to make contact with whoever was scraping.

After breakfast, Edmond waited tensely by the wall for an hour. Then it came! Scrape . . . scrape . . . scrape . . . He leaped up and grabbed his chair. Knocking the back of the chair against the wall, he made a clunking noise. He did it three times. At once the scraping stopped. Edmond knocked three times more. Trembling, he waited to hear something, anything. For an hour he stood

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

there holding the chair, ready to respond.

At last the sound behind the wall came again. In a fever of joy Edmond beat the back of the chair against the wall. Then he stopped suddenly, fearful that a jailor might hear him. To calm his rapidly beating heart, he threw himself down on his cot. There, he reproached himself for wasting twelve years by never trying to escape as the man behind his wall was trying.

This thought propelled Edmond off his cot and into a search for something to scrape with. His cot had iron clamps, but they were screwed tightly into the wood. His eyes lit up when he saw his water mug. Without hesitation, he dropped the mug onto the stone floor. It broke, and Edmond selected the largest and sharpest fragment. Then he attacked the wall with it. The scraping on the other side was so much like a companionship that Edmond found himself crying

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

with happiness.

The plaster that held the stones of the wall together was crumbly from age and from the dampness of the dungeon. Edmond scraped vigorously and was soon rewarded by a shower of plaster dust and small pieces of stone. He worked through the day. Before his jailor arrived with dinner, he moved his bed to conceal the loosening stone. He trickled the plaster dust out the window, then hid his scraper under his blanket and lay down on top of it.

Edmond was given another mug. The jailor did not notice that one large piece of the broken mug was missing when he swept the fragments from the dungeon. After dinner Edmond waited an hour before daring to go back to his task. While he waited, he rested because he was still weak from starving himself.

This pattern continued for the next two days. By then, Edmond had cleared all the

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

plaster from the sides of one stone. But when he tried to move the huge slab, his fingers could not budge it. He needed a lever to work the stone out. Desperately Edmond examined his dungeon. Nothing! "I cannot fail now," he told himself, pacing back and forth in his anxiety.

The jailors had begun bringing around dinner. The clank of their utensils came to Edmond's ears along with an idea. His nightly soup was brought in an iron pot. Its iron handle would make a perfect lever. But the jailor usually poured his soup from this pot into his plate and took the pot away with him.

"Suppose," Edmond whispered to himself with a wild surge of hope, "just suppose I did not have a plate." Quickly he put his plate in front of the door, then flung himself on his cot to watch and hope.

Edmond's jailor entered. All his attention was centered on not spilling the soup, so he did

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

not see the plate before his heavy foot crunched down on it.

“Look what you have made me do,” complained the jailor. “You have left your plate in my way. First your mug, now your plate. Do you think our citizens have nothing to do with their tax money but buy you dishes?” He was angry with Edmond but also with himself, for it was his foot that broke the dish. “All right, take the pot for your soup plate. See if you can keep *that* in one piece.”

Edmond almost fainted with joy. At most, he had hoped to have the iron pot for one night. Now it was to be his permanently. That night, he levered the big stone out easily with the pot handle and set to work scraping around the next stone. A passageway began to form with the first stone being moved in and out to conceal the entrance. Edmond found that the stones beyond it could be pushed under a wooden beam that arched in

back of the wall.

The day came when Edmond and the first scraper were working on the same stone from opposite ends. Edmond scraped with almost insane energy until they moved the last stone aside.

On their knees in the passageway, the two prisoners faced one another. They stretched out trembling hands and touched. Edmond drew the other man forward while he inched backward toward his entrance. Back in his dungeon, Edmond reached down and helped the other man to his feet.

“Who are you?” Edmond asked. His voice shook so, that he had to repeat the question.

The man answered, “I am Father Faria. The jailors call me ‘The Mad Priest.’ ”

CHAPTER 7

The Mad Priest

“The Mad Priest” was rather short. His hair was white from suffering, but his beard, which reached down to his chest, was still black. Yet he was probably sixty-five years old. His eyes burned, not with madness as the jailors said, but with intelligence. At once Edmond poured out the story of his imprisonment. Then it was Father Faria’s turn.

The priest had been at the Chateau d’If sixteen years, four years longer than Edmond. He was Italian, a man of the church, and learned. Political enemies had caused his

arrest after the death of the rich Cardinal Spada, who had protected Faria and treated him like a son.

As he listened, Edmond felt that his whole world had turned over, now that he had a friend. He dared to say "friend" even though Faria was so much older and so much better educated than he. Edmond would never have dared consider such a man his friend back in Marseilles. On his side, Faria was warmed by Edmond's youth and admiration for him.

For the next few weeks the two men used the passageway freely to go between Edmond's dungeon and the priest's cell. This cell was a larger and fitter place to live than the dungeon, since Faria was not considered dangerous, only mad, by his jailors.

Edmond was in a constant state of amazement at the priest's accomplishments. Faria had made a rope ladder, using the threads unraveled from his blanket. The sharp bone of

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

a fish had been fashioned into a needle. Cartilage, or tissue fibers, from other fish were made into pens, and an unused fireplace provided soot for ink. With such writing tools Faria had covered all of his shirts and handkerchiefs with his political ideas on the government in Italy. Sometimes he even used his own blood to write with. Finally, he showed Edmond his main accomplishment—a razor-sharp knife made from a candlestick.

As all these treasures were laid before Edmond, he began to weep at his own inferiority. Not only was he ignorant of everything written on Faria's cloth, but also he had wasted his prison years in idleness.

At Edmond's confession Faria's eyes shone, for he loved to teach. At once he formed a plan for Edmond's education. He, himself, knew four languages and had read widely in all of them. He was determined to pass them and all that he knew of mathematics, physics, and

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

history on to Edmond.

During the next year and a half, Faria taught, and Edmond made rapid progress. He was delighted to find within himself a love of learning, and he worked hard at his studies. Another change occurred in him. Without realizing it, he began to adopt Faria's refined quiet way of speaking and moving. Soon the rough sailor vanished, and an educated young gentleman emerged.

With his newly found powers of thinking Edmond also plotted their escape. They would tunnel into the corridor in front of Faria's cell. In the middle of the night they would burst out of the tunnel and overpower the two guards who always sat half-asleep at a table. Dressed in the guards' uniforms and using their keys, they would make their way out of the prison. Then they would jump into the sea and swim to safety. The two friends shook hands on it.