

Chapter IV. The Patterns.

During all this time the noble mob was slowly heaving away, leaving at every angle of the counter either a murmur or a menace, as the waves leave foam or scattered seaweed on the sands, when they retire with the ebbing tide. In about ten minutes Moliere reappeared, making another sign to D'Artagnan from under the hangings. The latter hurried after him, with Porthos in the rear, and after threading a labyrinth of corridors, introduced him to M. Percerin's room. The old man, with his sleeves turned up, was gathering up in folds a piece of gold-flowered brocade, so as the better to exhibit its luster. Perceiving D'Artagnan, he put the silk aside, and came to meet him, by no means radiant with joy, and by no means courteous, but, take it altogether, in a tolerably civil manner.

"The captain of the king's musketeers will excuse me, I am sure, for I am engaged."

"Eh! yes, on the king's costumes; I know that, my dear Monsieur Percerin. You are making three, they tell me."

"Five, my dear sir, five."

"Three or five, 'tis all the same to me, my dear monsieur; and I know that you will make them most exquisitely."

"Yes, I know. Once made they will be the most beautiful in the world, I do not deny it; but that they may be the most beautiful in the world, they must first be made; and to do this, captain, I am pressed for time."

"Oh, bah! there are two days yet; 'tis much more than you require, Monsieur Percerin," said D'Artagnan, in the coolest possible manner.

Percerin raised his head with the air of a man little accustomed to be contradicted, even in his whims; but D'Artagnan did not pay the least attention to the airs which the illustrious tailor began to assume.

"My dear M. Percerin," he continued, "I bring you a customer."

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed Percerin, crossly.

"M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds," continued D'Artagnan. Percerin attempted a bow, which found no favor in the eyes of the terrible Porthos, who, from his first entry into the room, had been regarding the tailor askance.

"A very good friend of mine," concluded D'Artagnan.

"I will attend to monsieur," said Percerin, "but later."

"Later? but when?"

"When I have time."

"You have already told my valet as much," broke in Porthos, discontentedly.

"Very likely," said Percerin; "I am nearly always pushed for time."

"My friend," returned Porthos, sententiously, "there is always time to be found when one chooses to seek it."

Percerin turned crimson; an ominous sign indeed in old men blanched by age.

"Monsieur is quite at liberty to confer his custom elsewhere."

"Come, come, Percerin," interposed D'Artagnan, "you are not in a good temper to-day. Well, I will say one more word to you, which will bring you on your knees; monsieur is not only a friend of mine, but more, a friend of M. Fouquet's."

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed the tailor, "that is another thing." Then turning to Porthos, "Monsieur le baron is attached to the superintendent?" he inquired.

"I am attached to myself," shouted Porthos, at the very moment that the tapestry was raised to introduce a new speaker in the dialogue. Moliere was all observation, D'Artagnan laughed, Porthos swore.

"My dear Percerin," said D'Artagnan, "you will make a dress for the baron. 'Tis I who ask you."

"To you I will not say nay, captain."

"But that is not all; you will make it for him at once."

"'Tis impossible within eight days."

"That, then, is as much as to refuse, because the dress is wanted for the *fete* at Vaux."

"I repeat that it is impossible," returned the obstinate old man.

"By no means, dear Monsieur Percerin, above all if *I* ask you," said a mild voice at the door, a silvery voice which made D'Artagnan prick up his ears. It was the voice of Aramis.

"Monsieur d'Herblay!" cried the tailor.

"Aramis," murmured D'Artagnan.

"Ah! our bishop!" said Porthos.

"Good morning, D'Artagnan; good morning, Porthos; good-morning, my dear friends," said Aramis. "Come, come, M. Percerin, make the baron's dress; and I will answer for it you will gratify M. Fouquet." And he accompanied the words with a sign, which seemed to say, "Agree, and dismiss them."

It appeared that Aramis had over Master Percerin an influence superior even to D'Artagnan's, for the tailor bowed in assent, and turning round upon Porthos, said, "Go and get measured on the other side."

Porthos colored in a formidable manner. D'Artagnan saw the storm coming, and addressing Moliere, said to him, in an undertone, "You see before you, my dear monsieur, a man who considers himself disgraced, if you measure the flesh and bones that Heaven has given him; study this type for me, Master Aristophanes, and profit by it."

Moliere had no need of encouragement, and his gaze dwelt long and keenly on the Baron Porthos. "Monsieur," he said, "if you will come with me, I will make them take your measure without touching you."

"Oh!" said Porthos, "how do you make that out, my friend?"

"I say that they shall apply neither line nor rule to the seams of your dress. It is a new method we have invented for measuring people of quality, who are too sensitive to allow low-born fellows to touch them. We know some susceptible persons who will not put up with being measured, a process which, as I think, wounds the natural dignity of a man; and if perchance monsieur should be one of these--"

"*Corboeuf!* I believe I am too!"

"Well, that is a capital and most consolatory coincidence, and you shall have the benefit of our invention."

"But how in the world can it be done?" asked Porthos, delighted.

"Monsieur," said Moliere, bowing, "if you will deign to follow me, you will see."

Aramis observed this scene with all his eyes. Perhaps he fancied from D'Artagnan's liveliness that he would leave with Porthos, so as not to lose the conclusion of a scene well begun. But, clear-sighted as he was,

Aramis deceived himself. Porthos and Moliere left together: D'Artagnan remained with Percerin. Why? From curiosity, doubtless; probably to enjoy a little longer the society of his good friend Aramis. As Moliere and Porthos disappeared, D'Artagnan drew near the bishop of Vannes, a proceeding which appeared particularly to disconcert him.

"A dress for you, also, is it not, my friend?"

Aramis smiled. "No," said he.

"You will go to Vaux, however?"

"I shall go, but without a new dress. You forget, dear D'Artagnan, that a poor bishop of Vannes is not rich enough to have new dresses for every *fete*."

"Bah!" said the musketeer, laughing, "and do we write no more poems now, either?"

"Oh! D'Artagnan," exclaimed Aramis, "I have long ago given up all such tomfoolery."

"True," repeated D'Artagnan, only half convinced. As for Percerin, he was once more absorbed in contemplation of the brocades.

"Don't you perceive," said Aramis, smiling, "that we are greatly boring this good gentleman, my dear D'Artagnan?"

"Ah! ah!" murmured the musketeer, aside; "that is, I am boring you, my friend." Then aloud, "Well, then, let us leave; I have no further business here, and if you are as disengaged as I, Aramis--"

"No, not I--I wished--"

"Ah! you had something particular to say to M. Percerin? Why did you not tell me so at once?"

"Something particular, certainly," repeated Aramis, "but not for you, D'Artagnan. But, at the same time, I hope you will believe that I can never have anything so particular to say that a friend like you may not hear it."

"Oh, no, no! I am going," said D'Artagnan, imparting to his voice an evident tone of curiosity; for Aramis's annoyance, well dissembled as it was, had not a whit escaped him; and he knew that, in that impenetrable mind, every thing, even the most apparently trivial, was designed to some end; an unknown one, but an end that, from the knowledge he had of his friend's character, the musketeer felt must be important.

On his part, Aramis saw that D'Artagnan was not without suspicion, and pressed him. "Stay, by all means," he said, "this is what it is." Then turning towards the tailor, "My dear Percerin," said he,--"I am even very happy that you are here, D'Artagnan."

"Oh, indeed," exclaimed the Gascon, for the third time, even less deceived this time than before.

Percerin never moved. Aramis roused him violently, by snatching from his hands the stuff upon which he was engaged. "My dear Percerin," said he, "I have, near hand, M. Lebrun, one of M. Fouquet's painters."

"Ah, very good," thought D'Artagnan; "but why Lebrun?"

Aramis looked at D'Artagnan, who seemed to be occupied with an engraving of Mark Antony. "And you wish that I should make him a dress, similar to those of the Epicureans?" answered Percerin. And while saying this, in an absent manner, the worthy tailor endeavored to recapture his piece of brocade.

"An Epicurean's dress?" asked D'Artagnan, in a tone of inquiry.

"I see," said Aramis, with a most engaging smile, "it is written that our dear D'Artagnan shall know all our secrets this evening. Yes, friend, you have surely heard speak of M. Fouquet's Epicureans, have you not?"

"Undoubtedly. Is it not a kind of poetical society, of which La Fontaine, Loret, Pelisson, and Moliere are members, and which holds its sittings at Saint-Mande?"

"Exactly so. Well, we are going to put our poets in uniform, and enroll them in a regiment for the king."

"Oh, very well, I understand; a surprise M. Fouquet is getting up for the king. Be at ease; if that is the secret about M. Lebrun, I will not mention it."

"Always agreeable, my friend. No, Monsieur Lebrun has nothing to do with this part of it; the secret which concerns him is far more important than the other."

"Then, if it is so important as all that, I prefer not to know it," said D'Artagnan, making a show of departure.

"Come in, M. Lebrun, come in," said Aramis, opening a side-door with his right hand, and holding back D'Artagnan with his left.

"I'faith, I too, am quite in the dark," quoth Percerin.

Aramis took an "opportunity," as is said in theatrical matters.

"My dear M. de Percerin," Aramis continued, "you are making five dresses for the king, are you not? One in brocade; one in hunting-cloth; one in velvet; one in satin; and one in Florentine stuffs."

"Yes; but how--do you know all that, monseigneur?" said Percerin, astounded.

"It is all very simple, my dear monsieur; there will be a hunt, a banquet, concert, promenade and reception; these five kinds of dress are required by etiquette."

"You know everything, monseigneur!"

"And a thing or two in addition," muttered D'Artagnan.

"But," cried the tailor, in triumph, "what you do not know, monseigneur--prince of the church though you are--what nobody will know--what only the king, Mademoiselle de la Valliere, and myself do know, is the color of the materials and nature of the ornaments, and the cut, the *ensemble*, the finish of it all!"

"Well," said Aramis, "that is precisely what I have come to ask you, dear Percerin."

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed the tailor, terrified, though Aramis had pronounced these words in his softest and most honeyed tones. The request appeared, on reflection, so exaggerated, so ridiculous, so monstrous to M. Percerin that first he laughed to himself, then aloud, and finished with a shout. D'Artagnan followed his example, not because he found the matter so "very funny," but in order not to allow Aramis to cool.

"At the outset, I appear to be hazarding an absurd question, do I not?" said Aramis. "But D'Artagnan, who is incarnate wisdom itself, will tell you that I could not do otherwise than ask you this."

"Let us see," said the attentive musketeer; perceiving with his wonderful instinct that they had only been skirmishing till now, and that the hour of battle was approaching.

"Let us see," said Percerin, incredulously.

"Why, now," continued Aramis, "does M. Fouquet give the king a *fete*?--Is it not to please him?"

"Assuredly," said Percerin. D'Artagnan nodded assent.

"By delicate attentions? by some happy device? by a succession of surprises, like that of which we were talking?--the enrolment of our Epicureans."

"Admirable."

"Well, then; this is the surprise we intend. M. Lebrun here is a man who draws most excellently."

"Yes," said Percerin; "I have seen his pictures, and observed that his dresses were highly elaborated. That is why I at once agreed to make him a costume--whether to agree with those of the Epicureans, or an original one."

"My dear monsieur, we accept your offer, and shall presently avail ourselves of it; but just now, M. Lebrun is not in want of the dresses you will make for himself, but of those you are making for the king."

Percerin made a bound backwards, which D'Artagnan--calmest and most appreciative of men, did not consider overdone, so many strange and startling aspects wore the proposal which Aramis had just hazarded. "The king's dresses! Give the king's dresses to any mortal whatever! Oh! for once, monseigneur, your grace is mad!" cried the poor tailor in extremity.

"Help me now, D'Artagnan," said Aramis, more and more calm and smiling. "Help me now to persuade monsieur, for *you* understand; do you not?"

"Eh! eh!--not exactly, I declare."

"What! you do not understand that M. Fouquet wishes to afford the king the surprise of finding his portrait on his arrival at Vaux; and that the portrait, which be a striking resemblance, ought to be dressed exactly as the king will be on the day it is shown?"

"Oh! yes, yes," said the musketeer, nearly convinced, so plausible was this reasoning. "Yes, my dear Aramis, you are right; it is a happy idea. I will wager it is one of your own, Aramis."

"Well, I don't know," replied the bishop; "either mine or M. Fouquet's." Then scanning Percerin, after noticing D'Artagnan's hesitation, "Well, Monsieur Percerin," he asked, "what do you say to this?"

"I say, that--"

"That you are, doubtless, free to refuse. I know well--and I by no means count upon compelling you, my dear monsieur. I will say more, I even understand all the delicacy you feel in taking up with M. Fouquet's idea; you dread appearing to flatter the king. A noble spirit, M.

Percerin, a noble spirit!" The tailor stammered. "It would, indeed, be a very pretty compliment to pay the young prince," continued Aramis; "but as the surintendant told me, 'if Percerin refuse, tell him that it will not at all lower him in my opinion, and I shall always esteem him, only--'"

"Only?" repeated Percerin, rather troubled.

"Only," continued Aramis, "I shall be compelled to say to the king, '--you understand, my dear Monsieur Percerin, that these are M. Fouquet's words,--I shall be constrained to say to the king, "Sire, I had intended to present your majesty with your portrait, but owing to a feeling of delicacy, slightly exaggerated perhaps, although creditable, M. Percerin opposed the project.'"

"Opposed!" cried the tailor, terrified at the responsibility which would weigh upon him; "I to oppose the desire, the will of M. Fouquet when he is seeking to please the king! Oh, what a hateful word you have uttered, monseigneur. Oppose! Oh, 'tis not I who said it, Heaven have mercy on me. I call the captain of the musketeers to witness it! Is it not true, Monsieur d'Artagnan, that I have opposed nothing?"

D'Artagnan made a sign indicating that he wished to remain neutral. He felt that there was an intrigue at the bottom of it, whether comedy or tragedy; he was at his wit's end at not being able to fathom it, but in the meanwhile wished to keep clear.

But already Percerin, goaded by the idea that the king was to be told he stood in the way of a pleasant surprise, had offered Lebrun a chair, and proceeded to bring from a wardrobe four magnificent dresses, the fifth being still in the workmen's hands; and these masterpieces he successively fitted upon four lay figures, which, imported into France in the time of Concini, had been given to Percerin II. by Marshal d'Onore, after the discomfiture of the Italian tailors ruined in their competition. The painter set to work to draw and then to paint the dresses. But Aramis, who was closely watching all the phases of his toil, suddenly stopped him.

"I think you have not quite got it, my dear Lebrun," he said; "your colors will deceive you, and on canvas we shall lack that exact resemblance which is absolutely requisite. Time is necessary for attentively observing the finer shades."

"Quite true," said Percerin, "but time is wanting, and on that head, you will agree with me, monseigneur, I can do nothing."

"Then the affair will fail," said Aramis, quietly, "and that because of a want of precision in the colors."

Nevertheless Lebrun went on copying the materials and ornaments with the closest fidelity--a process which Aramis watched with ill-concealed impatience.

"What in the world, now, is the meaning of this imbroglio?" the musketeer kept saying to himself.

"That will never do," said Aramis: "M. Lebrun, close your box, and roll up your canvas."

"But, monsieur," cried the vexed painter, "the light is abominable here."

"An idea, M. Lebrun, an idea! If we had a pattern of the materials, for example, and with time, and a better light--"

"Oh, then," cried Lebrun, "I would answer for the effect."

"Good!" said D'Artagnan, "this ought to be the knotty point of the whole thing; they want a pattern of each of the materials. *Mordioux!* Will this Percerin give in now?"

Percerin, beaten from his last retreat, and duped, moreover, by the feigned good-nature of Aramis, cut out five patterns and handed them to the bishop of Vannes.

"I like this better. That is your opinion, is it not?" said Aramis to D'Artagnan.

"My dear Aramis," said D'Artagnan, "my opinion is that you are always the same."

"And, consequently, always your friend," said the bishop in a charming tone.

"Yes, yes," said D'Artagnan, aloud; then, in a low voice, "If I am your dupe, double Jesuit that you are, I will not be your accomplice; and to prevent it, 'tis time I left this place.--Adieu, Aramis," he added aloud, "adieu; I am going to rejoin Porthos."

"Then wait for me," said Aramis, pocketing the patterns, "for I have done, and shall be glad to say a parting word to our dear old friend."

Lebrun packed up his paints and brushes, Percerin put back the dresses into the closet, Aramis put his hand on his pocket to assure himself the patterns were secure,--and they all left the study.