

## Chapter X. Crown and Tiara.

Aramis was the first to descend from the carriage; he held the door open for the young man. He saw him place his foot on the mossy ground with a trembling of the whole body, and walk round the carriage with an unsteady and almost tottering step. It seemed as if the poor prisoner was unaccustomed to walk on God's earth. It was the 15th of August, about eleven o'clock at night; thick clouds, portending a tempest, overspread the heavens, and shrouded every light and prospect underneath their heavy folds. The extremities of the avenues were imperceptibly detached from the copse, by a lighter shadow of opaque gray, which, upon closer examination, became visible in the midst of the obscurity. But the fragrance which ascended from the grass, fresher and more penetrating than that which exhaled from the trees around him; the warm and balmy air which enveloped him for the first time for many years past; the ineffable enjoyment of liberty in an open country, spoke to the prince in so seductive a language, that notwithstanding the preternatural caution, we would almost say dissimulation of his character, of which we have tried to give an idea, he could not restrain his emotion, and breathed a sigh of ecstasy. Then, by degrees, he raised his aching head and inhaled the softly scented air, as it was wafted in gentle gusts to his uplifted face. Crossing his arms on his chest, as if to control this new sensation of delight, he drank in delicious draughts of that mysterious air which interpenetrates at night the loftiest forests. The sky he was contemplating, the murmuring waters, the universal freshness--was not all this reality? Was not Aramis a madman to suppose that he had aught else to dream of in this world? Those exciting pictures of country life, so free from fears and troubles, the ocean of happy days that glitters incessantly before all young imaginations, are real allurements wherewith to fascinate a poor, unhappy prisoner, worn out by prison cares, emaciated by the stifling air of the Bastile. It was the picture, it will be remembered, drawn by Aramis, when he offered the thousand pistoles he had with him in the carriage to the prince, and the enchanted Eden which the deserts of Bas-Poitou hid from the eyes of the world. Such were the reflections of Aramis as he watched, with an anxiety impossible to describe, the silent progress of the emotions of Philippe, whom he perceived gradually becoming more and more absorbed in his meditations. The young prince was offering up an inward prayer to Heaven, to be divinely guided in this trying moment, upon which his life or death depended. It was an anxious time for the bishop of Vannes, who had never before been so perplexed. His iron will, accustomed to overcome all obstacles, never finding itself inferior or vanquished on any occasion, to be foiled in so vast a project from not having foreseen the influence which a view of nature in all its luxuriance would have on the human mind! Aramis, overwhelmed by anxiety, contemplated with emotion the painful struggle that was taking place in Philippe's mind. This suspense lasted the whole ten minutes which the young man had requested. During this space of time, which

appeared an eternity, Philippe continued gazing with an imploring and sorrowful look towards the heavens; Aramis did not remove the piercing glance he had fixed on Philippe. Suddenly the young man bowed his head. His thought returned to the earth, his looks perceptibly hardened, his brow contracted, his mouth assuming an expression of undaunted courage; again his looks became fixed, but this time they wore a worldly expression, hardened by covetousness, pride, and strong desire. Aramis's look immediately became as soft as it had before been gloomy. Philippe, seizing his hand in a quick, agitated manner, exclaimed:

"Lead me to where the crown of France is to be found."

"Is this your decision, monseigneur?" asked Aramis.

"It is."

"Irrevocably so?"

Philippe did not even deign to reply. He gazed earnestly at the bishop, as if to ask him if it were possible for a man to waver after having once made up his mind.

"Such looks are flashes of the hidden fire that betrays men's character," said Aramis, bowing over Philippe's hand; "you will be great, monseigneur, I will answer for that."

"Let us resume our conversation. I wished to discuss two points with you; in the first place the dangers, or the obstacles we may meet with. That point is decided. The other is the conditions you intend imposing on me. It is your turn to speak, M. d'Herblay."

"The conditions, monseigneur?"

"Doubtless. You will not allow so mere a trifle to stop me, and you will not do me the injustice to suppose that I think you have no interest in this affair. Therefore, without subterfuge or hesitation, tell me the truth--"

"I will do so, monseigneur. Once a king--"

"When will that be?"

"To-morrow evening--I mean in the night."

"Explain yourself."

"When I shall have asked your highness a question."

"Do so."

"I sent to your highness a man in my confidence with instructions to deliver some closely written notes, carefully drawn up, which will thoroughly acquaint your highness with the different persons who compose and will compose your court."

"I perused those notes."

"Attentively?"

"I know them by heart."

"And understand them? Pardon me, but I may venture to ask that question of a poor, abandoned captive of the Bastille? In a week's time it will not be requisite to further question a mind like yours. You will then be in full possession of liberty and power."

"Interrogate me, then, and I will be a scholar representing his lesson to his master."

"We will begin with your family, monseigneur."

"My mother, Anne of Austria! all her sorrows, her painful malady. Oh! I know her--I know her."

"Your second brother?" asked Aramis, bowing.

"To these notes," replied the prince, "you have added portraits so faithfully painted, that I am able to recognize the persons whose characters, manners, and history you have so carefully portrayed. Monsieur, my brother, is a fine, dark young man, with a pale face; he does not love his wife, Henrietta, whom I, Louis XIV., loved a little, and still flirt with, even although she made me weep on the day she wished to dismiss Mademoiselle de la Valliere from her service in disgrace."

"You will have to be careful with regard to the watchfulness of the latter," said Aramis; "she is sincerely attached to the actual king. The eyes of a woman who loves are not easily deceived."

"She is fair, has blue eyes, whose affectionate gaze reveals her identity. She halts slightly in her gait; she writes a letter every day, to which I have to send an answer by M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Do you know the latter?"

"As if I saw him, and I know the last verses he composed for me, as well as those I composed in answer to his."

"Very good. Do you know your ministers?"

"Colbert, an ugly, dark-browed man, but intelligent enough, his hair covering his forehead, a large, heavy, full head; the mortal enemy of M. Fouquet."

"As for the latter, we need not disturb ourselves about him."

"No; because necessarily you will not require me to exile him, I suppose?"

Aramis, struck with admiration at the remark, said, "You will become very great, monseigneur."

"You see," added the prince, "that I know my lesson by heart, and with Heaven's assistance, and yours afterwards, I shall seldom go wrong."

"You have still an awkward pair of eyes to deal with, monseigneur."

"Yes, the captain of the musketeers, M. d'Artagnan, your friend."

"Yes; I can well say 'my friend.'"

"He who escorted La Valliere to Le Chaillet; he who delivered up Monk, cooped in an iron box, to Charles II.; he who so faithfully served my mother; he to whom the crown of France owes so much that it owes everything. Do you intend to ask me to exile him also?"

"Never, sire. D'Artagnan is a man to whom, at a certain given time, I will undertake to reveal everything; but be on your guard with him, for if he discovers our plot before it is revealed to him, you or I will certainly be killed or taken. He is a bold and enterprising man."

"I will think it over. Now tell me about M. Fouquet; what do you wish to be done with regard to him?"

"One moment more, I entreat you, monseigneur; and forgive me, if I seem to fail in respect to questioning you further."

"It is your duty to do so, nay, more than that, your right."

"Before we pass to M. Fouquet, I should very much regret forgetting another friend of mine."

"M. du Vallon, the Hercules of France, you mean; oh! as far as he is concerned, his interests are more than safe."

"No; it is not he whom I intended to refer to."

"The Comte de la Fere, then?"

"And his son, the son of all four of us."

"That poor boy who is dying of love for La Valliere, whom my brother so disloyally bereft him of? Be easy on that score. I shall know how to rehabilitate his happiness. Tell me only one thing, Monsieur d'Herblay; do men, when they love, forget the treachery that has been shown them? Can a man ever forgive the woman who has betrayed him? Is that a French custom, or is it one of the laws of the human heart?"

"A man who loves deeply, as deeply as Raoul loves Mademoiselle de la Valliere, finishes by forgetting the fault or crime of the woman he loves; but I do not yet know whether Raoul will be able to forget."

"I will see after that. Have you anything further to say about your friend?"

"No; that is all."

"Well, then, now for M. Fouquet. What do you wish me to do for him?"

"To keep him on as surintendant, in the capacity in which he has hitherto acted, I entreat you."

"Be it so; but he is the first minister at present."

"Not quite so."

"A king, ignorant and embarrassed as I shall be, will, as a matter of course, require a first minister of state."

"Your majesty will require a friend."

"I have only one, and that is yourself."

"You will have many others by and by, but none so devoted, none so zealous for your glory."

"You shall be my first minister of state."

"Not immediately, monseigneur, for that would give rise to too much suspicion and astonishment."

"M. de Richelieu, the first minister of my grandmother, Marie de Medici, was simply bishop of Lucon, as you are bishop of Vannes."

"I perceive that your royal highness has studied my notes to great advantage; your amazing perspicacity overpowers me with delight."

"I am perfectly aware that M. de Richelieu, by means of the queen's protection, soon became cardinal."

"It would be better," said Aramis, bowing, "that I should not be appointed first minister until your royal highness has procured my nomination as cardinal."

"You shall be nominated before two months are past, Monsieur d'Herblay. But that is a matter of very trifling moment; you would not offend me if you were to ask more than that, and you would cause me serious regret if you were to limit yourself to that."

"In that case, I have something still further to hope for, monseigneur."

"Speak! speak!"

"M. Fouquet will not keep long at the head of affairs, he will soon get old. He is fond of pleasure, consistently, I mean, with all his labors, thanks to the youthfulness he still retains; but this protracted youth will disappear at the approach of the first serious annoyance, or at the first illness he may experience. We will spare him the annoyance, because he is an agreeable and noble-hearted man; but we cannot save him from ill-health. So it is determined. When you shall have paid all M. Fouquet's debts, and restored the finances to a sound condition, M. Fouquet will be able to remain the sovereign ruler in his little court of poets and painters,--we shall have made him rich. When that has been done, and I have become your royal highness's prime minister, I shall be able to think of my own interests and yours."

The young man looked at his interrogator.

"M. de Richelieu, of whom we were speaking just now, was very much to blame in the fixed idea he had of governing France alone, unaided. He allowed two kings, King Louis XIII. and himself, to be seated on the self-same throne, whilst he might have installed them more conveniently upon two separate and distinct thrones."

"Upon two thrones?" said the young man, thoughtfully.

"In fact," pursued Aramis, quietly, "a cardinal, prime minister of France, assisted by the favor and by the countenance of his Most Christian Majesty the King of France, a cardinal to whom the king his master lends the treasures of the state, his army, his counsel, such a man would be acting with twofold injustice in applying these mighty resources to France alone. Besides," added Aramis, "you will not be a king such as your father was, delicate in health, slow in judgment, whom all things wearied; you will be a king governing by your brain and by your sword; you will have in the government of the state no more than

you will be able to manage unaided; I should only interfere with you. Besides, our friendship ought never to be, I do not say impaired, but in any degree affected, by a secret thought. I shall have given you the throne of France, you will confer on me the throne of St. Peter. Whenever your loyal, firm, and mailed hand should joined in ties of intimate association the hand of a pope such as I shall be, neither Charles V., who owned two-thirds of the habitable globe, nor Charlemagne, who possessed it entirely, will be able to reach to half your stature. I have no alliances, I have no predilections; I will not throw you into persecutions of heretics, nor will I cast you into the troubled waters of family dissension; I will simply say to you: The whole universe is our own; for me the minds of men, for you their bodies. And as I shall be the first to die, you will have my inheritance. What do you say of my plan, monseigneur?"

"I say that you render me happy and proud, for no other reason than that of having comprehended you thoroughly. Monsieur d'Herblay, you shall be cardinal, and when cardinal, my prime minister; and then you will point out to me the necessary steps to be taken to secure your election as pope, and I will take them. You can ask what guarantees from me you please."

"It is useless. Never shall I act except in such a manner that you will be the gainer; I shall never ascend the ladder of fortune, fame, or position, until I have first seen you placed upon the round of the ladder immediately above me; I shall always hold myself sufficiently aloof from you to escape incurring your jealousy, sufficiently near to sustain your personal advantage and to watch over your friendship. All the contracts in the world are easily violated because the interests included in them incline more to one side than to another. With us, however, this will never be the case; I have no need of any guarantees."

"And so--my dear brother--will disappear?"

"Simply. We will remove him from his bed by means of a plank which yields to the pressure of the finger. Having retired to rest a crowned sovereign, he will awake a captive. Alone you will rule from that moment, and you will have no interest dearer and better than that of keeping me near you."

"I believe it. There is my hand on it, Monsieur d'Herblay."

"Allow me to kneel before you, sire, most respectfully. We will embrace each other on the day we shall have upon our temples, you the crown, I the tiara."

"Still embrace me this very day also, and be, for and towards me, more than great, more than skillful, more than sublime in genius; be kind and indulgent--be my father!"

Aramis was almost overcome as he listened to his voice; he fancied he detected in his own heart an emotion hitherto unknown; but this impression was speedily removed. "His father!" he thought; "yes, his Holy Father."

And they resumed their places in the carriage, which sped rapidly along the road leading to Vaux-le-Vicomte.