

Chapter XIV. A Gascon, and a Gascon and a Half.

D'Artagnan had determined to lose no time, and in fact he never was in the habit of doing so. After having inquired for Aramis, he had looked for him in every direction until he had succeeded in finding him. Besides, no sooner had the king entered Vaux, than Aramis had retired to his own room, meditating, doubtless, some new piece of gallant attention for his majesty's amusement. D'Artagnan desired the servants to announce him, and found on the second story (in a beautiful room called the Blue Chamber, on account of the color of its hangings) the bishop of Vannes in company with Porthos and several of the modern Epicureans. Aramis came forward to embrace his friend, and offered him the best seat. As it was after awhile generally remarked among those present that the musketeer was reserved, and wished for an opportunity for conversing secretly with Aramis, the Epicureans took their leave. Porthos, however, did not stir; for true it is that, having dined exceedingly well, he was fast asleep in his armchair; and the freedom of conversation therefore was not interrupted by a third person. Porthos had a deep, harmonious snore, and people might talk in the midst of its loud bass without fear of disturbing him. D'Artagnan felt that he was called upon to open the conversation.

"Well, and so we have come to Vaux," he said.

"Why, yes, D'Artagnan. And how do you like the place?"

"Very much, and I like M. Fouquet, also."

"Is he not a charming host?"

"No one could be more so."

"I am told that the king began by showing great distance of manner towards M. Fouquet, but that his majesty grew much more cordial afterwards."

"You did not notice it, then, since you say you have been told so?"

"No; I was engaged with the gentlemen who have just left the room about the theatrical performances and the tournaments which are to take place to-morrow."

"Ah, indeed! you are the comptroller-general of the fetes here, then?"

"You know I am a friend of all kinds of amusement where the exercise of the imagination is called into activity; I have always been a poet in one way or another."

"Yes, I remember the verses you used to write, they were charming."

"I have forgotten them, but I am delighted to read the verses of others, when those others are known by the names of Moliere, Pelisson, La Fontaine, etc."

"Do you know what idea occurred to me this evening, Aramis?"

"No; tell me what it was, for I should never be able to guess it, you have so many."

"Well, the idea occurred to me, that the true king of France is not Louis XIV."

"What!" said Aramis, involuntarily, looking the musketeer full in the eyes.

"No, it is Monsieur Fouquet."

Aramis breathed again, and smiled. "Ah! you are like all the rest, jealous," he said. "I would wager that it was M. Colbert who turned that pretty phrase." D'Artagnan, in order to throw Aramis off his guard, related Colbert's misadventures with regard to the vin de Melun.

"He comes of a mean race, does Colbert," said Aramis.

"Quite true."

"When I think, too," added the bishop, "that that fellow will be your minister within four months, and that you will serve him as blindly as you did Richelieu or Mazarin--"

"And as you serve M. Fouquet," said D'Artagnan.

"With this difference, though, that M. Fouquet is not M. Colbert."

"True, true," said D'Artagnan, as he pretended to become sad and full of reflection; and then, a moment after, he added, "Why do you tell me that M. Colbert will be minister in four months?"

"Because M. Fouquet will have ceased to be so," replied Aramis.

"He will be ruined, you mean?" said D'Artagnan.

"Completely so."

"Why does he give these fetes, then?" said the musketeer, in a tone so full of thoughtful consideration, and so well assumed, that the bishop was for the moment deceived by it. "Why did you not dissuade him from it?"

The latter part of the phrase was just a little too much, and Aramis's former suspicions were again aroused. "It is done with the object of humoring the king."

"By ruining himself?"

"Yes, by ruining himself for the king."

"A most eccentric, one might say, sinister calculation, that."

"Necessity, necessity, my friend."

"I don't see that, dear Aramis."

"Do you not? Have you not remarked M. Colbert's daily increasing antagonism, and that he is doing his utmost to drive the king to get rid of the superintendent?"

"One must be blind not to see it."

"And that a cabal is already armed against M. Fouquet?"

"That is well known."

"What likelihood is there that the king would join a party formed against a man who will have spent everything he had to please him?"

"True, true," said D'Artagnan, slowly, hardly convinced, yet curious to broach another phase of the conversation. "There are follies, and follies," he resumed, "and I do not like those you are committing."

"What do you allude to?"

"As for the banquet, the ball, the concert, the theatricals, the tournaments, the cascades, the fireworks, the illuminations, and the presents--these are well and good, I grant; but why were not these expenses sufficient? Why was it necessary to have new liveries and costumes for your whole household?"

"You are quite right. I told M. Fouquet that myself; he replied, that if he were rich enough he would offer the king a newly erected chateau, from the vanes at the houses to the very sub-cellars; completely new inside and out; and that, as soon as the king had left, he would burn the whole building and its contents, in order that it might not be made use of by any one else."

"How completely Spanish!"

"I told him so, and he then added this: 'Whoever advises me to spare expense, I shall look upon as my enemy.'"

"It is positive madness; and that portrait, too!"

"What portrait?" said Aramis.

"That of the king, and the surprise as well."

"What surprise?"

"The surprise you seem to have in view, and on account of which you took some specimens away, when I met you at Percerin's." D'Artagnan paused. The shaft was discharged, and all he had to do was to wait and watch its effect.

"That is merely an act of graceful attention," replied Aramis.

D'Artagnan went up to his friend, took hold of both his hands, and looking him full in the eyes, said, "Aramis, do you still care for me a very little?"

"What a question to ask!"

"Very good. One favor, then. Why did you take some patterns of the king's costumes at Percerin's?"

"Come with me and ask poor Lebrun, who has been working upon them for the last two days and nights."

"Aramis, that may be truth for everybody else, but for me--"

"Upon my word, D'Artagnan, you astonish me."

"Be a little considerate. Tell me the exact truth; you would not like anything disagreeable to happen to me, would you?"

"My dear friend, you are becoming quite incomprehensible. What suspicion can you have possibly got hold of?"

"Do you believe in my instinctive feelings? Formerly you used to have faith in them. Well, then, an instinct tells me that you have some concealed project on foot."

"I--a project?"

"I am convinced of it."

"What nonsense!"

"I am not only sure of it, but I would even swear it."

"Indeed, D'Artagnan, you cause me the greatest pain. Is it likely, if I have any project in hand that I ought to keep secret from you, I should tell you about it? If I had one that I could and ought to have revealed, should I not have long ago divulged it?"

"No, Aramis, no. There are certain projects which are never revealed until the favorable opportunity arrives."

"In that case, my dear fellow," returned the bishop, laughing, "the only thing now is, that the 'opportunity' has not yet arrived."

D'Artagnan shook his head with a sorrowful expression. "Oh, friendship, friendship!" he said, "what an idle word you are! Here is a man who, if I were but to ask it, would suffer himself to be cut in pieces for my sake."

"You are right," said Aramis, nobly.

"And this man, who would shed every drop of blood in his veins for me, will not open up before me the least corner in his heart. Friendship, I repeat, is nothing but an unsubstantial shadow--a lure, like everything else in this bright, dazzling world."

"It is not thus you should speak of our friendship," replied the bishop, in a firm, assured voice; "for ours is not of the same nature as those of which you have been speaking."

"Look at us, Aramis; three out of the old 'four.' You are deceiving me; I suspect you; and Porthos is fast asleep. An admirable trio of friends, don't you think so? What an affecting relic of the former dear old times!"

"I can only tell you one thing, D'Artagnan, and I swear it on the Bible: I love you just as I used to do. If I ever suspect you, it is on account of others, and not on account of either of us. In everything I may do, and should happen to succeed in, you will find your fourth. Will you promise me the same favor?"

"If I am not mistaken, Aramis, your words--at the moment you pronounce them--are full of generous feeling."

"Such a thing is very possible."

"You are conspiring against M. Colbert. If that be all, mordieux, tell me so at once. I have the instrument in my own hand, and will pull out the tooth easily enough."

Aramis could not conceal a smile of disdain that flitted over his haughty features. "And supposing that I were conspiring against Colbert, what harm would there be in that?"

"No, no; that would be too trifling a matter for you to take in hand, and it was not on that account you asked Percerin for those patterns of the king's costumes. Oh! Aramis, we are not enemies, remember--we are brothers. Tell me what you wish to undertake, and, upon the word of a D'Artagnan, if I cannot help you, I will swear to remain neuter."

"I am undertaking nothing," said Aramis.

"Aramis, a voice within me speaks and seems to trickle forth a rill of light within my darkness: it is a voice that has never yet deceived me. It is the king you are conspiring against."

"The king?" exclaimed the bishop, pretending to be annoyed.

"Your face will not convince me; the king, I repeat."

"Will you help me?" said Aramis, smiling ironically.

"Aramis, I will do more than help you--I will do more than remain neuter--I will save you."

"You are mad, D'Artagnan."

"I am the wiser of the two, in this matter."

"You to suspect me of wishing to assassinate the king!"

"Who spoke of such a thing?" smiled the musketeer.

"Well, let us understand one another. I do not see what any one can do to a legitimate king as ours is, if he does not assassinate him." D'Artagnan did not say a word. "Besides, you have your guards and your musketeers here," said the bishop.

"True."

"You are not in M. Fouquet's house, but in your own."

"True; but in spite of that, Aramis, grant me, for pity's sake, one single word of a true friend."

"A true friend's word is ever truth itself. If I think of touching, even with my finger, the son of Anne of Austria, the true king of this realm of France--if I have not the firm intention of prostrating myself before

his throne--if in every idea I may entertain to-morrow, here at Vaux, will not be the most glorious day my king ever enjoyed--may Heaven's lightning blast me where I stand!" Aramis had pronounced these words with his face turned towards the alcove of his own bedroom, where D'Artagnan, seated with his back towards the alcove, could not suspect that any one was lying concealed. The earnestness of his words, the studied slowness with which he pronounced them, the solemnity of his oath, gave the musketeer the most complete satisfaction. He took hold of both Aramis's hands, and shook them cordially. Aramis had endured reproaches without turning pale, and had blushed as he listened to words of praise. D'Artagnan, deceived, did him honor; but D'Artagnan, trustful and reliant, made him feel ashamed. "Are you going away?" he said, as he embraced him, in order to conceal the flush on his face.

"Yes. Duty summons me. I have to get the watch-word. It seems I am to be lodged in the king's ante-room. Where does Porthos sleep?"

"Take him away with you, if you like, for he rumbles through his sleepy nose like a park of artillery."

"Ah! he does not stay with you, then?" said D'Artagnan.

"Not the least in the world. He has a chamber to himself, but I don't know where."

"Very good!" said the musketeer; from whom this separation of the two associates removed his last suspicion, and he touched Porthos lightly on the shoulder; the latter replied by a loud yawn. "Come," said D'Artagnan.

"What, D'Artagnan, my dear fellow, is that you? What a lucky chance! Oh, yes--true; I have forgotten; I am at the fete at Vaux."

"Yes; and your beautiful dress, too."

"Yes, it was very attentive on the part of Monsieur Coquelin de Voliere, was it not?"

"Hush!" said Aramis. "You are walking so heavily you will make the flooring give way."

"True," said the musketeer; "this room is above the dome, I think."

"And I did not choose it for a fencing-room, I assure you," added the bishop. "The ceiling of the king's room has all the lightness and calm of wholesome sleep. Do not forget, therefore, that my flooring is merely the covering of his ceiling. Good night, my friends, and in ten minutes I shall be asleep myself." And Aramis accompanied them to the door, laughing quietly all the while. As soon as they were outside, he bolted

the door, hurriedly; closed up the chinks of the windows, and then called out, "Monseigneur!--monseigneur!" Philippe made his appearance from the alcove, as he pushed aside a sliding panel placed behind the bed.

"M. d'Artagnan entertains a great many suspicions, it seems," he said.

"Ah!--you recognized M. d'Artagnan, then?"

"Before you called him by his name, even."

"He is your captain of musketeers."

"He is very devoted to me," replied Philippe, laying a stress upon the personal pronoun.

"As faithful as a dog; but he bites sometimes. If D'Artagnan does not recognize you before the other has disappeared, rely upon D'Artagnan to the end of the world; for in that case, if he has seen nothing, he will keep his fidelity. If he sees, when it is too late, he is a Gascon, and will never admit that he has been deceived."

"I thought so. What are we to do, now?"

"Sit in this folding-chair. I am going to push aside a portion of the flooring; you will look through the opening, which answers to one of the false windows made in the dome of the king's apartment. Can you see?"

"Yes," said Philippe, starting as at the sight of an enemy; "I see the king!"

"What is he doing?"

"He seems to wish some man to sit down close to him."

"M. Fouquet?"

"No, no; wait a moment--"

"Look at the notes and the portraits, my prince."

"The man whom the king wishes to sit down in his presence is M. Colbert."

"Colbert sit down in the king's presence!" exclaimed Aramis. "It is impossible."

"Look."

Aramis looked through the opening in the flooring. "Yes," he said. "Colbert himself. Oh, monseigneur! what can we be going to hear--and what can result from this intimacy?"

"Nothing good for M. Fouquet, at all events."

The prince did not deceive himself.

We have seen that Louis XIV. had sent for Colbert, and Colbert had arrived. The conversation began between them by the king according to him one of the highest favors that he had ever done; it was true the king was alone with his subject. "Colbert," said he, "sit down."

The intendant, overcome with delight, for he feared he was about to be dismissed, refused this unprecedented honor.

"Does he accept?" said Aramis.

"No, he remains standing."

"Let us listen, then." And the future king and the future pope listened eagerly to the simple mortals they held under their feet, ready to crush them when they liked.

"Colbert," said the king, "you have annoyed me exceedingly to-day."

"I know it, sire."

"Very good; I like that answer. Yes, you knew it, and there was courage in the doing of it."

"I ran the risk of displeasing your majesty, but I risked, also, the concealment of your best interests."

"What! you were afraid of something on my account?"

"I was, sire, even if it were nothing more than an indigestion," said Colbert; "for people do not give their sovereigns such banquets as the one of to-day, unless it be to stifle them beneath the burden of good living." Colbert awaited the effect this coarse jest would produce upon the king; and Louis XIV., who was the vainest and the most fastidiously delicate man in his kingdom, forgave Colbert the joke.

"The truth is," he said, "that M. Fouquet has given me too good a meal. Tell me, Colbert, where does he get all the money required for this enormous expenditure,--can you tell?"

"Yes, I do know, sire."

"Will you be able to prove it with tolerable certainty?"

"Easily; and to the utmost farthing."

"I know you are very exact."

"Exactitude is the principal qualification required in an intendant of finances."

"But all are not so."

"I thank you majesty for so flattering a compliment from your own lips."

"M. Fouquet, therefore, is rich--very rich, and I suppose every man knows he is so."

"Every one, sire; the living as well as the dead."

"What does that mean, Monsieur Colbert?"

"The living are witnesses of M. Fouquet's wealth,--they admire and applaud the result produced; but the dead, wiser and better informed than we are, know how that wealth was obtained--and they rise up in accusation."

"So that M. Fouquet owes his wealth to some cause or other."

"The occupation of an intendant very often favors those who practice it."

"You have something to say to me more confidentially, I perceive; do not be afraid, we are quite alone."

"I am never afraid of anything under the shelter of my own conscience, and under the protection of your majesty," said Colbert, bowing.

"If the dead, therefore, were to speak--"

"They do speak sometimes, sire,--read."

"Ah!" murmured Aramis, in the prince's ear, who, close beside him, listened without losing a syllable, "since you are placed here, monseigneur, in order to learn your vocation of a king, listen to a piece of infamy--of a nature truly royal. You are about to be a witness of one of those scenes which the foul fiend alone conceives and executes. Listen attentively,--you will find your advantage in it."

The prince redoubled his attention, and saw Louis XIV. take from Colbert's hands a letter the latter held out to him.

"The late cardinal's handwriting," said the king.

"Your majesty has an excellent memory," replied Colbert, bowing; "it is an immense advantage for a king who is destined for hard work to recognize handwritings at the first glance."

The king read Mazarin's letter, and, as its contents are already known to the reader, in consequence of the misunderstanding between Madame de Chevreuse and Aramis, nothing further would be learned if we stated them here again.

"I do not quite understand," said the king, greatly interested.

"Your majesty has not acquired the utilitarian habit of checking the public accounts."

"I see that it refers to money that had been given to M. Fouquet."

"Thirteen millions. A tolerably good sum."

"Yes. Well, these thirteen millions are wanting to balance the total of the account. That is what I do not very well understand. How was this deficit possible?"

"Possible I do not say; but there is no doubt about fact that it is really so."

"You say that these thirteen millions are found to be wanting in the accounts?"

"I do not say so, but the registry does."

"And this letter of M. Mazarin indicates the employment of that sum and the name of the person with whom it was deposited?"

"As your majesty can judge for yourself."

"Yes; and the result is, then, that M. Fouquet has not yet restored the thirteen millions."

"That results from the accounts, certainly, sire."

"Well, and, consequently--"

"Well, sire, in that case, inasmuch as M. Fouquet has not yet given back the thirteen millions, he must have appropriated them to his own purpose; and with those thirteen millions one could incur four times and a little more as much expense, and make four times as great a display,

as your majesty was able to do at Fontainebleau, where we only spent three millions altogether, if you remember."

For a blunderer, the souvenir he had evoked was a rather skillfully contrived piece of baseness; for by the remembrance of his own fete he, for the first time, perceived its inferiority compared with that of Fouquet. Colbert received back again at Vaux what Fouquet had given him at Fontainebleau, and, as a good financier, returned it with the best possible interest. Having once disposed the king's mind in this artful way, Colbert had nothing of much importance to detain him. He felt that such was the case, for the king, too, had again sunk into a dull and gloomy state. Colbert awaited the first words from the king's lips with as much impatience as Philippe and Aramis did from their place of observation.

"Are you aware what is the usual and natural consequence of all this, Monsieur Colbert?" said the king, after a few moments' reflection.

"No, sire, I do not know."

"Well, then, the fact of the appropriation of the thirteen millions, if it can be proved--"

"But it is so already."

"I mean if it were to be declared and certified, M. Colbert."

"I think it will be to-morrow, if your majesty--"

"Were we not under M. Fouquet's roof, you were going to say, perhaps," replied the king, with something of nobility in his demeanor.

"The king is in his own palace wherever he may be--especially in houses which the royal money has constructed."

"I think," said Philippe in a low tone to Aramis, "that the architect who planned this dome ought, anticipating the use it could be put to at a future opportunity, so to have contrived that it might be made to fall upon the heads of scoundrels such as M. Colbert."

"I think so too," replied Aramis; "but M. Colbert is so very near the king at this moment."

"That is true, and that would open the succession."

"Of which your younger brother would reap all the advantage, monseigneur. But stay, let us keep quiet, and go on listening."

"We shall not have long to listen," said the young prince.

"Why not, monseigneur?"

"Because, if I were king, I should make no further reply."

"And what would you do?"

"I should wait until to-morrow morning to give myself time for reflection."

Louis XIV. at last raised his eyes, and finding Colbert attentively waiting for his next remarks, said, hastily, changing the conversation, "M. Colbert, I perceive it is getting very late, and I shall now retire to bed. By to-morrow morning I shall have made up my mind."

"Very good, sire," returned Colbert, greatly incensed, although he restrained himself in the presence of the king.

The king made a gesture of adieu, and Colbert withdrew with a respectful bow. "My attendants!" cried the king; and, as they entered the apartment, Philippe was about to quit his post of observation.

"A moment longer," said Aramis to him, with his accustomed gentleness of manner; "what has just now taken place is only a detail, and to-morrow we shall have no occasion to think anything more about it; but the ceremony of the king's retiring to rest, the etiquette observed in addressing the king, that indeed is of the greatest importance. Learn, sire, and study well how you ought to go to bed of a night. Look! look!"