

Chapter XVII. High Treason.

The ungovernable fury which took possession of the king at the sight and at the perusal of Fouquet's letter to La Valliere by degrees subsided into a feeling of pain and extreme weariness. Youth, invigorated by health and lightness of spirits, requiring soon that what it loses should be immediately restored--youth knows not those endless, sleepless nights which enable us to realize the fable of the vulture unceasingly feeding on Prometheus. In cases where the man of middle life, in his acquired strength of will and purpose, and the old, in their state of natural exhaustion, find incessant augmentation of their bitter sorrow, a young man, surprised by the sudden appearance of misfortune, weakens himself in sighs, and groans, and tears, directly struggling with his grief, and is thereby far sooner overthrown by the inflexible enemy with whom he is engaged. Once overthrown, his struggles cease. Louis could not hold out more than a few minutes, at the end of which he had ceased to clench his hands, and scorch in fancy with his looks the invisible objects of his hatred; he soon ceased to attack with his violent imprecations not M. Fouquet alone, but even La Valliere herself; from fury he subsided into despair, and from despair to prostration. After he had thrown himself for a few minutes to and fro convulsively on his bed, his nerveless arms fell quietly down; his head lay languidly on his pillow; his limbs, exhausted with excessive emotion, still trembled occasionally, agitated by muscular contractions; while from his breast faint and infrequent sighs still issued. Morpheus, the tutelary deity of the apartment, towards whom Louis raised his eyes, wearied by his anger and reconciled by his tears, showered down upon him the sleep-inducing poppies with which his hands are ever filled; so presently the monarch closed his eyes and fell asleep. Then it seemed to him, as it often happens in that first sleep, so light and gentle, which raises the body above the couch, and the soul above the earth--it seemed to him, we say, as if the god Morpheus, painted on the ceiling, looked at him with eyes resembling human eyes; that something shone brightly, and moved to and fro in the dome above the sleeper; that the crowd of terrible dreams which thronged together in his brain, and which were interrupted for a moment, half revealed a human face, with a hand resting against the mouth, and in an attitude of deep and absorbed meditation. And strange enough, too, this man bore so wonderful a resemblance to the king himself, that Louis fancied he was looking at his own face reflected in a mirror; with the exception, however, that the face was saddened by a feeling of the profoundest pity. Then it seemed to him as if the dome gradually retired, escaping from his gaze, and that the figures and attributes painted by Lebrun became darker and darker as the distance became more and more remote. A gentle, easy movement, as regular as that by which a vessel plunges beneath the waves, had succeeded to the immovableness of the bed. Doubtless the king was dreaming, and in this dream the crown of gold, which fastened the curtains together, seemed to recede from his vision, just as the dome, to which it remained suspended, had done, so that the winged genius which, with both its

hand, supported the crown, seemed, though vainly so, to call upon the king, who was fast disappearing from it. The bed still sunk. Louis, with his eyes open, could not resist the deception of this cruel hallucination. At last, as the light of the royal chamber faded away into darkness and gloom, something cold, gloomy, and inexplicable in its nature seemed to infect the air. No paintings, nor gold, nor velvet hangings, were visible any longer, nothing but walls of a dull gray color, which the increasing gloom made darker every moment. And yet the bed still continued to descend, and after a minute, which seemed in its duration almost an age to the king, it reached a stratum of air, black and chill as death, and then it stopped. The king could no longer see the light in his room, except as from the bottom of a well we can see the light of day. "I am under the influence of some atrocious dream," he thought. "It is time to awaken from it. Come! let me wake."

Every one has experienced the sensation the above remark conveys; there is hardly a person who, in the midst of a nightmare whose influence is suffocating, has not said to himself, by the help of that light which still burns in the brain when every human light is extinguished, "It is nothing but a dream, after all." This was precisely what Louis XIV. said to himself; but when he said, "Come, come! wake up," he perceived that not only was he already awake, but still more, that he had his eyes open also. And then he looked all round him. On his right hand and on his left two armed men stood in stolid silence, each wrapped in a huge cloak, and the face covered with a mask; one of them held a small lamp in his hand, whose glimmering light revealed the saddest picture a king could look upon. Louis could not help saying to himself that his dream still lasted, and that all he had to do to cause it to disappear was to move his arms or to say something aloud; he darted from his bed, and found himself upon the damp, moist ground. Then, addressing himself to the man who held the lamp in his hand, he said:

"What is this, monsieur, and what is the meaning of this jest?"

"It is no jest," replied in a deep voice the masked figure that held the lantern.

"Do you belong to M. Fouquet?" inquired the king, greatly astonished at his situation.

"It matters very little to whom we belong," said the phantom; "we are your masters now, that is sufficient."

The king, more impatient than intimidated, turned to the other masked figure. "If this is a comedy," he said, "you will tell M. Fouquet that I find it unseemly and improper, and that I command it should cease."

The second masked person to whom the king had addressed himself was a man of huge stature and vast circumference. He held himself erect and

motionless as any block of marble. "Well!" added the king, stamping his foot, "you do not answer!"

"We do not answer you, my good monsieur," said the giant, in a stentorian voice, "because there is nothing to say."

"At least, tell me what you want," exclaimed Louis, folding his arms with a passionate gesture.

"You will know by and by," replied the man who held the lamp.

"In the meantime tell me where I am."

"Look."

Louis looked all round him; but by the light of the lamp which the masked figure raised for the purpose, he could perceive nothing but the damp walls which glistened here and there with the slimy traces of the snail. "Oh--oh!--a dungeon," cried the king.

"No, a subterranean passage."

"Which leads--?"

"Will you be good enough to follow us?"

"I shall not stir from hence!" cried the king.

"If you are obstinate, my dear young friend," replied the taller of the two, "I will lift you up in my arms, and roll you up in your own cloak, and if you should happen to be stifled, why--so much the worse for you."

As he said this, he disengaged from beneath his cloak a hand of which Milo of Crotona would have envied him the possession, on the day when he had that unhappy idea of rending his last oak. The king dreaded violence, for he could well believe that the two men into whose power he had fallen had not gone so far with any idea of drawing back, and that they would consequently be ready to proceed to extremities, if necessary. He shook his head and said: "It seems I have fallen into the hands of a couple of assassins. Move on, then."

Neither of the men answered a word to this remark. The one who carried the lantern walked first, the king followed him, while the second masked figure closed the procession. In this manner they passed along a winding gallery of some length, with as many staircases leading out of it as are to be found in the mysterious and gloomy palaces of Ann Radcliffe's creation. All these windings and turnings, during which the king heard the sound of running water over his head, ended at last in a long corridor closed by an iron door. The figure with the lamp opened the

door with one of the keys he wore suspended at his girdle, where, during the whole of the brief journey, the king had heard them rattle. As soon as the door was opened and admitted the air, Louis recognized the balmy odors that trees exhale in hot summer nights. He paused, hesitatingly, for a moment or two; but the huge sentinel who followed him thrust him out of the subterranean passage.

"Another blow," said the king, turning towards the one who had just had the audacity to touch his sovereign; "what do you intend to do with the king of France?"

"Try to forget that word," replied the man with the lamp, in a tone which as little admitted of a reply as one of the famous decrees of Minos.

"You deserve to be broken on the wheel for the words that you have just made use of," said the giant, as he extinguished the lamp his companion handed to him; "but the king is too kind-hearted."

Louis, at that threat, made so sudden a movement that it seemed as if he meditated flight; but the giant's hand was in a moment placed on his shoulder, and fixed him motionless where he stood. "But tell me, at least, where we are going," said the king.

"Come," replied the former of the two men, with a kind of respect in his manner, and leading his prisoner towards a carriage which seemed to be in waiting.

The carriage was completely concealed amid the trees. Two horses, with their feet fettered, were fastened by a halter to the lower branches of a large oak.

"Get in," said the same man, opening the carriage-door and letting down the step. The king obeyed, seated himself at the back of the carriage, the padded door of which was shut and locked immediately upon him and his guide. As for the giant, he cut the fastenings by which the horses were bound, harnessed them himself, and mounted on the box of the carriage, which was unoccupied. The carriage set off immediately at a quick trot, turned into the road to Paris, and in the forest of Senart found a relay of horses fastened to the trees in the same manner the first horses had been, and without a postilion. The man on the box changed the horses, and continued to follow the road towards Paris with the same rapidity, so that they entered the city about three o'clock in the morning. Their carriage proceeded along the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and, after having called out to the sentinel, "By the king's order," the driver conducted the horses into the circular inclosure of the Bastille, looking out upon the courtyard, called La Cour du Gouvernement. There the horses drew up, reeking with sweat, at the flight of steps, and a sergeant of the guard ran forward. "Go and wake the governor," said the

coachman in a voice of thunder.

With the exception of this voice, which might have been heard at the entrance of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, everything remained as calm in the carriage as in the prison. Ten minutes afterwards, M. de Baisemeaux appeared in his dressing-gown on the threshold of the door. "What is the matter now?" he asked; "and whom have you brought me there?"

The man with the lantern opened the carriage-door, and said two or three words to the one who acted as driver, who immediately got down from his seat, took up a short musket which he kept under his feet, and placed its muzzle on his prisoner's chest.

"And fire at once if he speaks!" added aloud the man who alighted from the carriage.

"Very good," replied his companion, without another remark.

With this recommendation, the person who had accompanied the king in the carriage ascended the flight of steps, at the top of which the governor was awaiting him. "Monsieur d'Herblay!" said the latter.

"Hush!" said Aramis. "Let us go into your room."

"Good heavens! what brings you here at this hour?"

"A mistake, my dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux," Aramis replied, quietly. "It appears that you were quite right the other day."

"What about?" inquired the governor.

"About the order of release, my dear friend."

"Tell me what you mean, monsieur--no, monseigneur," said the governor, almost suffocated by surprise and terror.

"It is a very simple affair: you remember, dear M. de Baisemeaux, that an order of release was sent to you."

"Yes, for Marchiali."

"Very good! we both thought that it was for Marchiali?"

"Certainly; you will recollect, however, that I would not credit it, but that you compelled me to believe it."

"Oh! Baisemeaux, my good fellow, what a word to make use of!--strongly recommended, that was all."

"Strongly recommended, yes; strongly recommended to give him up to you; and that you carried him off with you in your carriage."

"Well, my dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux, it was a mistake; it was discovered at the ministry, so that I now bring you an order from the king to set at liberty Seldon,--that poor Seldon fellow, you know."

"Seldon! are you sure this time?"

"Well, read it yourself," added Aramis, handing him the order.

"Why," said Baisemeaux, "this order is the very same that has already passed through my hands."

"Indeed?"

"It is the very one I assured you I saw the other evening. Parbleu! I recognize it by the blot of ink."

"I do not know whether it is that; but all I know is, that I bring it for you."

"But then, what about the other?"

"What other?"

"Marchiali."

"I have got him here with me."

"But that is not enough for me. I require a new order to take him back again."

"Don't talk such nonsense, my dear Baisemeaux; you talk like a child! Where is the order you received respecting Marchiali?"

Baisemeaux ran to his iron chest and took it out. Aramis seized hold of it, coolly tore it in four pieces, held them to the lamp, and burnt them. "Good heavens! what are you doing?" exclaimed Baisemeaux, in an extremity of terror.

"Look at your position quietly, my good governor," said Aramis, with imperturbable self-possession, "and you will see how very simple the whole affair is. You no longer possess any order justifying Marchiali's release."

"I am a lost man!"

"Far from it, my good fellow, since I have brought Marchiali back to

you, and all accordingly is just the same as if he had never left."

"Ah!" said the governor, completely overcome by terror.

"Plain enough, you see; and you will go and shut him up immediately."

"I should think so, indeed."

"And you will hand over this Seldon to me, whose liberation is authorized by this order. Do you understand?"

"I--I--"

"You do understand, I see," said Aramis. "Very good." Baisemeaux clapped his hands together.

"But why, at all events, after having taken Marchiali away from me, do you bring him back again?" cried the unhappy governor, in a paroxysm of terror, and completely dumbfounded.

"For a friend such as you are," said Aramis--"for so devoted a servant, I have no secrets;" and he put his mouth close to Baisemeaux's ear, as he said, in a low tone of voice, "you know the resemblance between that unfortunate fellow, and--"

"And the king?--yes!"

"Very good; the first use that Marchiali made of his liberty was to persist--Can you guess what?"

"How is it likely I should guess?"

"To persist in saying that he was king of France; to dress himself up in clothes like those of the king; and then pretend to assume that he was the king himself."

"Gracious heavens!"

"That is the reason why I have brought him back again, my dear friend. He is mad and lets every one see how mad he is."

"What is to be done, then?"

"That is very simple; let no one hold any communication with him. You understand that when his peculiar style of madness came to the king's ears, the king, who had pitied his terrible affliction, and saw that all his kindness had been repaid by black ingratitude, became perfectly furious; so that, now--and remember this very distinctly, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux, for it concerns you most closely--so that there is now, I

repeat, sentence of death pronounced against all those who may allow him to communicate with any one else but me or the king himself. You understand, Baisemeaux, sentence of death!"

"You need not ask me whether I understand."

"And now, let us go down, and conduct this poor devil back to his dungeon again, unless you prefer he should come up here."

"What would be the good of that?"

"It would be better, perhaps, to enter his name in the prison-book at once!"

"Of course, certainly; not a doubt of it."

"In that case, have him up."

Baisemeaux ordered the drums to be beaten and the bell to be rung, as a warning to every one to retire, in order to avoid meeting a prisoner, about whom it was desired to observe a certain mystery. Then, when the passages were free, he went to take the prisoner from the carriage, at whose breast Porthos, faithful to the directions which had been given him, still kept his musket leveled. "Ah! is that you, miserable wretch?" cried the governor, as soon as he perceived the king. "Very good, very good." And immediately, making the king get out of the carriage, he led him, still accompanied by Porthos, who had not taken off his mask, and Aramis, who again resumed his, up the stairs, to the second Bertaudiere, and opened the door of the room in which Philippe for six long years had bemoaned his existence. The king entered the cell without pronouncing a single word: he faltered in as limp and haggard as a rain-struck lily. Baisemeaux shut the door upon him, turned the key twice in the lock, and then returned to Aramis. "It is quite true," he said, in a low tone, "that he bears a striking resemblance to the king; but less so than you said."

"So that," said Aramis, "you would not have been deceived by the substitution of the one for the other?"

"What a question!"

"You are a most valuable fellow, Baisemeaux," said Aramis; "and now, set Seldon free."

"Oh, yes. I was going to forget that. I will go and give orders at once."

"Bah! to-morrow will be time enough."

"To-morrow!--oh, no. This very minute."

"Well; go off to your affairs, I will go away to mine. But it is quite understood, is it not?"

"What 'is quite understood'?"

"That no one is to enter the prisoner's cell, except with an order from the king; an order which I will myself bring."

"Quite so. Adieu, monseigneur."

Aramis returned to his companion. "Now, Porthos, my good fellow, back again to Vaux, and as fast as possible."

"A man is light and easy enough, when he has faithfully served his king; and, in serving him, saved his country," said Porthos. "The horses will be as light as if our tissues were constructed of the wind of heaven. So let us be off." And the carriage, lightened of a prisoner, who might well be--as he in fact was--very heavy in the sight of Aramis, passed across the drawbridge of the Bastile, which was raised again immediately behind it.