

## Chapter XXXI. The Silver Dish.

The journey passed off pretty well. Athos and his son traversed France at the rate of fifteen leagues per day; sometimes more, sometimes less, according to the intensity of Raoul's grief. It took them a fortnight to reach Toulon, and they lost all traces of D'Artagnan at Antibes. They were forced to believe that the captain of the musketeers was desirous of preserving an incognito on his route, for Athos derived from his inquiries an assurance that such a cavalier as he described had exchanged his horse for a well-closed carriage on quitting Avignon. Raoul was much affected at not meeting with D'Artagnan. His affectionate heart longed to take a farewell and received consolation from that heart of steel. Athos knew from experience that D'Artagnan became impenetrable when engaged in any serious affair, whether on his own account or on the service of the king. He even feared to offend his friend, or thwart him by too pressing inquiries. And yet when Raoul commenced his labor of classing the flotilla, and got together the chalands and lighters to send them to Toulon, one of the fishermen told the comte that his boat had been laid up to refit since a trip he had made on account of a gentleman who was in great haste to embark. Athos, believing that this man was telling a falsehood in order to be left at liberty to fish, and so gain more money when all his companions were gone, insisted upon having the details. The fisherman informed him that six days previously, a man had come in the night to hire his boat, for the purpose of visiting the island of St. Honnorat. The price was agreed upon, but the gentleman had arrived with an immense carriage case, which he insisted upon embarking, in spite of the many difficulties that opposed the operation. The fisherman wished to retract. He had even threatened, but his threats had procured him nothing but a shower of blows from the gentleman's cane, which fell upon his shoulders sharp and long. Swearing and grumbling, he had recourse to the syndic of his brotherhood at Antibes, who administer justice among themselves and protect each other; but the gentleman had exhibited a certain paper, at sight of which the syndic, bowing to the very ground, enjoined obedience from the fisherman, and abused him for having been refractory. They then departed with the freight.

"But all this does not tell us," said Athos, "how you injured your boat."

"This is the way. I was steering towards St. Honnorat as the gentleman desired me; but he changed his mind, and pretended that I could not pass to the south of the abbey."

"And why not?"

"Because, monsieur, there is in front of the square tower of the Benedictines, towards the southern point, the bank of the Moines."

"A rock?" asked Athos.

"Level with the water, but below water; a dangerous passage, yet one I have cleared a thousand times; the gentleman required me to land him at Sainte-Marguerite's."

"Well?"

"Well, monsieur!" cried the fisherman, with his Provençal accent, "a man is a sailor, or he is not; he knows his course, or he is nothing but a fresh-water lubber. I was obstinate, and wished to try the channel. The gentleman took me by the collar, and told me quietly he would strangle me. My mate armed himself with a hatchet, and so did I. We had the affront of the night before to pay him out for. But the gentleman drew his sword, and used it in such an astonishingly rapid manner, that we neither of us could get near him. I was about to hurl my hatchet at his head, and I had a right to do so, hadn't I, monsieur? for a sailor aboard is master, as a citizen is in his chamber; I was going, then, in self-defense, to cut the gentleman in two, when, all at once--believe me or not, monsieur--the great carriage case opened of itself, I don't know how, and there came out of it a sort of a phantom, his head covered with a black helmet and a black mask, something terrible to look upon, which came towards me threatening with its fist."

"And that was--" said Athos.

"That was the devil, monsieur; for the gentleman, with great glee, cried out, on seeing him: 'Ah! thank you, monseigneur!'"

"A most strange story!" murmured the comte, looking at Raoul.

"And what did you do?" asked the latter of the fisherman.

"You must know, monsieur, that two poor men, such as we are, could be no match for two gentlemen; but when one of them turned out to be the devil, we had no earthly chance! My companion and I did not stop to consult one another; we made but one jump into the sea, for we were within seven or eight hundred feet of the shore."

"Well, and then?"

"Why, and then, monseigneur, as there was a little wind from the southwest, the boat drifted into the sands of Sainte-Marguerite's."

"Oh!--but the travelers?"

"Bah! you need not be uneasy about them! It was pretty plain that one was the devil, and protected the other; for when we recovered the boat, after she got afloat again, instead of finding these two creatures

injured by the shock, we found nothing, not even the carriage or the case."

"Very strange! very strange!" repeated the comte. "But after that, what did you do, my friend?"

"I made my complaint to the governor of Sainte-Marguerite's, who brought my finger under my nose by telling me if I plagued him with such silly stories he would have me flogged."

"What! did the governor himself say so?"

"Yes, monsieur; and yet my boat was injured, seriously injured, for the prow is left upon the point of Sainte-Marguerite's, and the carpenter asks a hundred and twenty livres to repair it."

"Very well," replied Raoul; "you will be exempted from the service. Go."

"We will go to Sainte-Marguerite's, shall we?" said the comte to Bragelonne, as the man walked away.

"Yes, monsieur, for there is something to be cleared up; that man does not seem to me to have told the truth."

"Nor to me either, Raoul. The story of the masked man and the carriage having disappeared, may be told to conceal some violence these fellows have committed upon their passengers in the open sea, to punish him for his persistence in embarking."

"I formed the same suspicion; the carriage was more likely to contain property than a man."

"We shall see to that, Raoul. The gentleman very much resembles D'Artagnan; I recognize his methods of proceeding. Alas! we are no longer the young invincibles of former days. Who knows whether the hatchet or the iron bar of this miserable coaster has not succeeded in doing that which the best blades of Europe, balls, and bullets have not been able to do in forty years?"

That same day they set out for Sainte-Marguerite's, on board a chasse-maree come from Toulon under orders. The impression they experienced on landing was a singularly pleasing one. The island seemed loaded with flowers and fruits. In its cultivated part it served as a garden for the governor. Orange, pomegranate, and fig trees bent beneath the weight of their golden or purple fruits. All round this garden, in the uncultivated parts, red partridges ran about in conveys among the brambles and tufts of junipers, and at every step of the comte and Raoul a terrified rabbit quitted his thyme and heath to scuttle away to the burrow. In fact, this fortunate isle was uninhabited. Flat, offering

nothing but a tiny bay for the convenience of embarkation, and under the protection of the governor, who went shares with them, smugglers made use of it as a provisional entrepot, at the expense of not killing the game or devastating the garden. With this compromise, the governor was in a situation to be satisfied with a garrison of eight men to guard his fortress, in which twelve cannons accumulated coats of moldy green. The governor was a sort of happy farmer, harvesting wines, figs, oil, and oranges, preserving his citrons and cedrates in the sun of his casemates. The fortress, encircled by a deep ditch, its only guardian, arose like three heads upon turrets connected with each other by terraces covered with moss.

Athos and Raoul wandered for some time round the fences of the garden without finding any one to introduce them to the governor. They ended by making their own way into the garden. It was at the hottest time of the day. Each living thing sought its shelter under grass or stone. The heavens spread their fiery veils as if to stifle all noises, to envelop all existences; the rabbit under the broom, the fly under the leaf, slept as the wave did beneath the heavens. Athos saw nothing living but a soldier, upon the terrace beneath the second and third court, who was carrying a basket of provisions on his head. This man returned almost immediately without his basket, and disappeared in the shade of his sentry-box. Athos supposed he must have been carrying dinner to some one, and, after having done so, returned to dine himself. All at once they heard some one call out, and raising their heads, perceived in the frame of the bars of the window something of a white color, like a hand that was waved backwards and forwards--something shining, like a polished weapon struck by the rays of the sun. And before they were able to ascertain what it was, a luminous train, accompanied by a hissing sound in the air, called their attention from the donjon to the ground. A second dull noise was heard from the ditch, and Raoul ran to pick up a silver plate which was rolling along the dry sand. The hand that had thrown this plate made a sign to the two gentlemen, and then disappeared. Athos and Raoul, approaching each other, commenced an attentive examination of the dusty plate, and they discovered, in characters traced upon the bottom of it with the point of a knife, this inscription:

"I am the brother of the king of France--a prisoner to-day--a madman to-morrow. French gentlemen and Christians, pray to God for the soul and the reason of the son of your old rulers."

The plate fell from the hands of Athos whilst Raoul was endeavoring to make out the meaning of these dismal words. At the same moment they heard a cry from the top of the donjon. Quick as lightning Raoul bent down his head, and forced down that of his father likewise. A musket-barrel glittered from the crest of the wall. A white smoke floated like a plume from the mouth of the musket, and a ball was flattened against a stone within six inches of the two gentlemen.

"Cordieu!" cried Athos. "What, are people assassinated here? Come down, cowards as you are!"

"Yes, come down!" cried Raoul, furiously shaking his fist at the castle.

One of the assailants--he who was about to fire--replied to these cries by an exclamation of surprise; and, as his companion, who wished to continue the attack, had re-seized his loaded musket, he who had cried out threw up the weapon, and the ball flew into the air. Athos and Raoul, seeing them disappear from the platform, expected they would come down to them, and waited with a firm demeanor. Five minutes had not elapsed, when a stroke upon a drum called the eight soldiers of the garrison to arms, and they showed themselves on the other side of the ditch with their muskets in hand. At the head of these men was an officer, whom Athos and Raoul recognized as the one who had fired the first musket. The man ordered the soldiers to "make ready."

"We are going to be shot!" cried Raoul; "but, sword in hand, at least, let us leap the ditch! We shall kill at least two of these scoundrels, when their muskets are empty." And, suiting the action to the word, Raoul was springing forward, followed by Athos, when a well-known voice resounded behind them, "Athos! Raoul!"

"D'Artagnan!" replied the two gentlemen.

"Recover arms! Mordieux!" cried the captain to the soldiers. "I was sure I could not be mistaken!"

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Athos. "What! were we to be shot without warning?"

"It was I who was going to shoot you, and if the governor missed you, I should not have missed you, my dear friends. How fortunate it is that I am accustomed to take a long aim, instead of firing at the instant I raise my weapon! I thought I recognized you. Ah! my dear friends, how fortunate!" And D'Artagnan wiped his brow, for he had run fast, and emotion with him was not feigned.

"How!" said Athos. "And is the gentleman who fired at us the governor of the fortress?"

"In person."

"And why did he fire at us? What have we done to him?"

"Pardieu! You received what the prisoner threw to you?"

"That is true."

"That plate--the prisoner has written something on it, has he not?"

"Yes."

"Good heavens! I was afraid he had."

And D'Artagnan, with all the marks of mortal disquietude, seized the plate, to read the inscription. When he had read it, a fearful pallor spread across his countenance. "Oh! good heavens!" repeated he. "Silence!--Here is the governor."

"And what will he do to us? Is it our fault?"

"It is true, then?" said Athos, in a subdued voice. "It is true?"

"Silence! I tell you--silence! If he only believes you can read; if he only suspects you have understood; I love you, my dear friends, I would willingly be killed for you, but--"

"But--" said Athos and Raoul.

"But I could not save you from perpetual imprisonment if I saved you from death. Silence, then! Silence again!"

The governor came up, having crossed the ditch upon a plank bridge.

"Well!" said he to D'Artagnan, "what stops us?"

"You are Spaniards--you do not understand a word of French," said the captain, eagerly, to his friends in a low voice.

"Well!" replied he, addressing the governor, "I was right; these gentlemen are two Spanish captains with whom I was acquainted at Ypres, last year; they don't know a word of French."

"Ah!" said the governor, sharply. "And yet they were trying to read the inscription on the plate."

D'Artagnan took it out of his hands, effacing the characters with the point of his sword.

"How!" cried the governor, "what are you doing? I cannot read them now!"

"It is a state secret," replied D'Artagnan, bluntly; "and as you know that, according to the king's orders, it is under the penalty of death any one should penetrate it, I will, if you like, allow you to read it, and have you shot immediately afterwards."

During this apostrophe--half serious, half ironical--Athos and Raoul preserved the coolest, most unconcerned silence.

"But, is it possible," said the governor, "that these gentlemen do not comprehend at least some words?"

"Suppose they do! If they do understand a few spoken words, it does not follow that they should understand what is written. They cannot even read Spanish. A noble Spaniard, remember, ought never to know how to read."

The governor was obliged to be satisfied with these explanations, but he was still tenacious. "Invite these gentlemen to come to the fortress," said he.

"That I will willingly do. I was about to propose it to you." The fact is, the captain had quite another idea, and would have wished his friends a hundred leagues off. But he was obliged to make the best of it. He addressed the two gentlemen in Spanish, giving them a polite invitation, which they accepted. They all turned towards the entrance of the fort, and, the incident being at an end, the eight soldiers returned to their delightful leisure, for a moment disturbed by this unexpected adventure.