

Chapter XXXII. Captive and Jailers.

When they had entered the fort, and whilst the governor was making some preparations for the reception of his guests, "Come," said Athos, "let us have a word of explanation whilst we are alone."

"It is simply this," replied the musketeer. "I have conducted hither a prisoner, who the king commands shall not be seen. You came here, he has thrown something to you through the lattice of his window; I was at dinner with the governor, I saw the object thrown, and I saw Raoul pick it up. It does not take long to understand this. I understood it, and I thought you in intelligence with my prisoner. And then--"

"And then--you commanded us to be shot."

"Ma foi! I admit it; but, if I was the first to seize a musket, fortunately, I was the last to take aim at you."

"If you had killed me, D'Artagnan, I should have had the good fortune to die for the royal house of France, and it would be an honor to die by your hand--you, its noblest and most loyal defender."

"What the devil, Athos, do you mean by the royal house?" stammered D'Artagnan. "You don't mean that you, a well-informed and sensible man, can place any faith in the nonsense written by an idiot?"

"I do believe in it."

"With so much the more reason, my dear chevalier, from your having orders to kill all those who do believe in it," said Raoul.

"That is because," replied the captain of the musketeers--"because every calumny, however absurd it may be, has the almost certain chance of becoming popular."

"No, D'Artagnan," replied Athos, promptly; "but because the king is not willing that the secret of his family should transpire among the people, and cover with shame the executioners of the son of Louis XIII."

"Do not talk in such a childish manner, Athos, or I shall begin to think you have lost your senses. Besides, explain to me how it is possible Louis XIII. should have a son in the Isle of Sainte-Marguerite."

"A son whom you have brought hither masked, in a fishing-boat," said Athos. "Why not?"

D'Artagnan was brought to a pause.

"Oh!" said he; "whence do you know that a fishing-boat--?"

"Brought you to Sainte-Marguerite's with the carriage containing the prisoner--with a prisoner whom you styled monseigneur. Oh! I am acquainted with all that," resumed the comte. D'Artagnan bit his mustache.

"If it were true," said he, "that I had brought hither in a boat and with a carriage a masked prisoner, nothing proves that this prisoner must be a prince--a prince of the house of France."

"Ask Aramis such riddles," replied Athos, coolly.

"Aramis," cried the musketeer, quite at a stand. "Have you seen Aramis?"

"After his discomfiture at Vaux, yes; I have seen Aramis, a fugitive, pursued, bewildered, ruined; and Aramis has told me enough to make me believe in the complaints this unfortunate young prince cut upon the bottom of the plate."

D'Artagnan's head sunk on his breast in some confusion. "This is the way," said he, "in which God turns to nothing that which men call wisdom! A fine secret must that be of which twelve or fifteen persons hold the tattered fragments! Athos, cursed be the chance which has brought you face to face with me in this affair! for now--"

"Well," said Athos, with his customary mild severity, "is your secret lost because I know it? Consult your memory, my friend. Have I not borne secrets heavier than this?"

"You have never borne one so dangerous," replied D'Artagnan, in a tone of sadness. "I have something like a sinister idea that all who are concerned with this secret will die, and die unhappily."

"The will of God be done!" said Athos, "but here is your governor."

D'Artagnan and his friends immediately resumed their parts. The governor, suspicious and hard, behaved towards D'Artagnan with a politeness almost amounting to obsequiousness. With respect to the travelers, he contented himself with offering good cheer, and never taking his eye from them. Athos and Raoul observed that he often tried to embarrass them by sudden attacks, or to catch them off their guard; but neither the one nor the other gave him the least advantage. What D'Artagnan had said was probable, if the governor did not believe it to be quite true. They rose from the table to repose awhile.

"What is this man's name? I don't like the looks of him," said Athos to D'Artagnan in Spanish.

"De Saint-Mars," replied the captain.

"He is, then, I suppose, the prince's jailer?"

"Eh! how can I tell? I may be kept at Sainte-Marguerite forever."

"Oh! no, not you!"

"My friend, I am in the situation of a man who finds a treasure in the midst of a desert. He would like to carry it away, but he cannot; he would like to leave it, but he dares not. The king will not dare to recall me, for no one else would serve him as faithfully as I do; he regrets not having me near him, from being aware that no one would be of so much service near his person as myself. But it will happen as it may please God."

"But," observed Raoul, "your not being certain proves that your situation here is provisional, and you will return to Paris?"

"Ask these gentlemen," interrupted the governor, "what was their purpose in coming to Saint-Marguerite?"

"They came from learning there was a convent of Benedictines at Sainte-Honorat which is considered curious; and from being told there was excellent shooting in the island."

"That is quite at their service, as well as yours," replied Saint-Mars.

D'Artagnan politely thanked him.

"When will they depart?" added the governor.

"To-morrow," replied D'Artagnan.

M. de Saint-Mars went to make his rounds, and left D'Artagnan alone with the pretended Spaniards.

"Oh!" exclaimed the musketeer, "here is a life and a society that suits me very little. I command this man, and he bores me, mordieux! Come, let us have a shot or two at the rabbits; the walk will be beautiful, and not fatiguing. The whole island is but a league and a half in length, with the breadth of a league; a real park. Let us try to amuse ourselves."

"As you please, D'Artagnan; not for the sake of amusing ourselves, but to gain an opportunity for talking freely."

D'Artagnan made a sign to a soldier, who brought the gentlemen some guns, and then returned to the fort.

"And now," said the musketeer, "answer me the question put to you by that black-looking Saint-Mars: what did you come to do at the Lerin Isles?"

"To bid you farewell."

"Bid me farewell! What do you mean by that? Is Raoul going anywhere?"

"Yes."

"Then I will lay a wager it is with M. de Beaufort."

"With M. de Beaufort it is, my dear friend. You always guess correctly."

"From habit."

Whilst the two friends were commencing their conversation, Raoul, with his head hanging down and his heart oppressed, seated himself on a mossy rock, his gun across his knees, looking at the sea--looking at the heavens, and listening to the voice of his soul; he allowed the sportsmen to attain a considerable distance from him. D'Artagnan remarked his absence.

"He has not recovered the blow?" said he to Athos.

"He is struck to death."

"Oh! your fears exaggerate, I hope. Raoul is of a tempered nature. Around all hearts as noble as his, there is a second envelope that forms a cuirass. The first bleeds, the second resists."

"No," replied Athos, "Raoul will die of it."

"Mordioux!" said D'Artagnan, in a melancholy tone. And he did not add a word to this exclamation. Then, a minute after, "Why do you let him go?"

"Because he insists on going."

"And why do you not go with him?"

"Because I could not bear to see him die."

D'Artagnan looked his friend earnestly in the face. "You know one thing," continued the comte, leaning upon the arm of the captain; "you know that in the course of my life I have been afraid of but few things. Well! I have an incessant gnawing, insurmountable fear that an hour will come in which I shall hold the dead body of that boy in my arms."

"Oh!" murmured D'Artagnan; "oh!"

"He will die, I know, I have a perfect conviction of that; but I would not see him die."

"How is this, Athos? you come and place yourself in the presence of the bravest man, you say you have ever seen, of your own D'Artagnan, of that man without an equal, as you formerly called him, and you come and tell him, with your arms folded, that you are afraid of witnessing the death of your son, you who have seen all that can be seen in this world! Why have you this fear, Athos? Man upon this earth must expect everything, and ought to face everything."

"Listen to me, my friend. After having worn myself out upon this earth of which you speak, I have preserved but two religions: that of life, friendship, my duty as a father--that of eternity, love, and respect for God. Now, I have within me the revelation that if God should decree that my friend or my son should render up his last sigh in my presence--oh! no, I cannot even tell you, D'Artagnan!"

"Speak, speak, tell me!"

"I am strong against everything, except against the death of those I love. For that only there is no remedy. He who dies, gains; he who sees others die, loses. No, this is it--to know that I should no more meet on earth him whom I now behold with joy; to know that there would nowhere be a D'Artagnan any more, nowhere again be a Raoul, oh! I am old, look you, I have no longer courage; I pray God to spare me in my weakness; but if he struck me so plainly and in that fashion, I should curse him. A Christian gentleman ought not to curse his God, D'Artagnan; it is enough to once have cursed a king!"

"Humph!" sighed D'Artagnan, a little confused by this violent tempest of grief.

"Let me speak to him, Athos. Who knows?"

"Try, if you please, but I am convinced you will not succeed."

"I will not attempt to console him. I will serve him."

"You will?"

"Doubtless, I will. Do you think this would be the first time a woman had repented of an infidelity? I will go to him, I tell you."

Athos shook his head, and continued his walk alone, D'Artagnan, cutting across the brambles, rejoined Raoul and held out his hand to him. "Well, Raoul! You have something to say to me?"

"I have a kindness to ask of you," replied Bragelonne.

"Ask it, then."

"You will some day return to France?"

"I hope so."

"Ought I to write to Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

"No, you must not."

"But I have many things to say to her."

"Go and say them to her, then."

"Never!"

"Pray, what virtue do you attribute to a letter, which your speech might not possess?"

"Perhaps you are right."

"She loves the king," said D'Artagnan, bluntly; "and she is an honest girl." Raoul started. "And you, you whom she abandons, she, perhaps, loves better than she does the king, but after another fashion."

"D'Artagnan, do you believe she loves the king?"

"To idolatry. Her heart is inaccessible to any other feeling. You might continue to live near her, and would be her best friend."

"Ah!" exclaimed Raoul, with a passionate burst of repugnance at such a hideous hope.

"Will you do so?"

"It would be base."

"That is a very absurd word, which would lead me to think slightly of your understanding. Please to understand, Raoul, that it is never base to do that which is imposed upon us by a superior force. If your heart says to you, 'Go there, or die,' why go, Raoul. Was she base or brave, she whom you loved, in preferring the king to you, the king whom her heart commanded her imperiously to prefer to you? No, she was the bravest of women. Do, then, as she has done. Oblige yourself. Do you know one thing of which I am sure, Raoul?"

"What is that?"

"Why, that by seeing her closely with the eyes of a jealous man--"

"Well?"

"Well! you would cease to love her."

"Then I am decided, my dear D'Artagnan."

"To set off to see her again?"

"No; to set off that I may never see her again. I wish to love her forever."

"Ha! I must confess," replied the musketeer, "that is a conclusion which I was far from expecting."

"This is what I wish, my friend. You will see her again, and you will give her a letter which, if you think proper, will explain to her, as to yourself, what is passing in my heart. Read it; I drew it up last night. Something told me I should see you to-day." He held the letter out, and D'Artagnan read:

"MADEMOISELLE,--You are not wrong in my eyes in not loving me. You have only been guilty of one fault towards me, that of having left me to believe you loved me. This error will cost me my life. I pardon you, but I cannot pardon myself. It is said that happy lovers are deaf to the sorrows of rejected lovers. It will not be so with you, who did not love me, save with anxiety. I am sure that if I had persisted in endeavoring to change that friendship into love, you would have yielded out of a fear of bringing about my death, or lessening the esteem I had for you. It is much more delightful to me to die, knowing that you are free and satisfied. How much, then, will you love me, when you will no longer fear either my presence or reproaches? You will love me, because, however charming a new love may appear to you, God has not made me in anything inferior to him you have chosen, and because my devotedness, my sacrifice, and my painful end will assure me, in your eyes, a certain superiority over him. I have allowed to escape, in the candid credulity of my heart, the treasure I possessed. Many people tell me that you loved me enough to lead me to hope you would have loved me much. That idea takes from my mind all bitterness, and leads me only to blame myself. You will accept this last farewell, and you will bless me for having taken refuge in the inviolable asylum where hatred is extinguished, and where all love endures forever. Adieu, mademoiselle. If your happiness could be purchased by the last drop of my blood, I would shed that drop. I willingly make the sacrifice of it to my misery!

"RAOUL, VICOTME DE BRAGELONNE."

"The letter reads very well," said the captain. "I have only one fault to find with it."

"Tell me what that is!" said Raoul.

"Why, it is that it tells everything, except the thing which exhales, like a mortal poison from your eyes and from your heart; except the senseless love which still consumes you." Raoul grew paler, but remained silent.

"Why did you not write simply these words:

"MADEMOISELLE,--Instead of cursing you, I love you and I die."

"That is true," exclaimed Raoul, with a sinister kind of joy.

And tearing the letter he had just taken back, he wrote the following words upon a leaf of his tablets:

"To procure the happiness of once more telling you I love you, I commit the baseness of writing to you; and to punish myself for that baseness, I die." And he signed it.

"You will give her these tablets, captain, will you not?"

"When?" asked the latter.

"On the day," said Bragelonne, pointing to the last sentence, "on the day when you can place a date under these words." And he sprang away quickly to join Athos, who was returning with slow steps.

As they re-entered the fort, the sea rose with that rapid, gusty vehemence which characterizes the Mediterranean; the ill-humor of the element became a tempest. Something shapeless, and tossed about violently by the waves, appeared just off the coast.

"What is that?" said Athos,--"a wrecked boat?"

"No, it is not a boat," said D'Artagnan.

"Pardon me," said Raoul, "there is a bark gaining the port rapidly."

"Yes, there is a bark in the creek, which is prudently seeking shelter here; but that which Athos points to in the sand is not a boat at all--it has run aground."



"Yes, yes, I see it."

"It is the carriage, which I threw into the sea after landing the prisoner."

"Well!" said Athos, "if you take my advice, D'Artagnan, you will burn that carriage, in order that no vestige of it may remain, without which the fishermen of Antibes, who have believed they had to do with the devil, will endeavor to prove that your prisoner was but a man."

"Your advice is good, Athos, and I will this night have it carried out, or rather, I will carry it out myself; but let us go in, for the rain falls heavily, and the lightning is terrific."

As they were passing over the ramparts to a gallery of which D'Artagnan had the key, they saw M. de Saint-Mars directing his steps towards the chamber inhabited by the prisoner. Upon a sign from D'Artagnan, they concealed themselves in an angle of the staircase.

"What is it?" said Athos.

"You will see. Look. The prisoner is returning from chapel."

And they saw, by the red flashes of lightning against the violet fog which the wind stamped upon the bank-ward sky, they saw pass gravely, at six paces behind the governor, a man clothed in black and masked by a vizor of polished steel, soldered to a helmet of the same nature, which altogether enveloped the whole of his head. The fire of the heavens cast red reflections on the polished surface, and these reflections, flying off capriciously, seemed to be angry looks launched by the unfortunate, instead of imprecations. In the middle of the gallery, the prisoner stopped for a moment, to contemplate the infinite horizon, to respire the sulphurous perfumes of the tempest, to drink in thirstily the hot rain, and to breathe a sigh resembling a smothered groan.

"Come on, monsieur," said Saint-Mars, sharply, to the prisoner, for he already became uneasy at seeing him look so long beyond the walls. "Monsieur, come on!"

"Say monseigneur!" cried Athos, from his corner, with a voice so solemn and terrible, that the governor trembled from head to foot. Athos insisted upon respect being paid to fallen majesty. The prisoner turned round.

"Who spoke?" asked Saint-Mars.

"It was I," replied D'Artagnan, showing himself promptly. "You know that is the order."

"Call me neither monsieur nor monseigneur," said the prisoner in his turn, in a voice that penetrated to the very soul of Raoul; "call me ACCURSED!" He passed on, and the iron door croaked after him.

"There goes a truly unfortunate man!" murmured the musketeer in a hollow whisper, pointing out to Raoul the chamber inhabited by the prince.