

Chapter XXXVIII. Friendly Advice.

Fouquet had gone to bed, like a man who clings to life, and wishes to economize, as much as possible, that slender tissue of existence, of which the shocks and frictions of this world so quickly wear out the tenuity. D'Artagnan appeared at the door of this chamber, and was saluted by the superintendent with a very affable "Good day."

"Bon jour! monseigneur," replied the musketeer; "how did you get through the journey?"

"Tolerably well, thank you."

"And the fever?"

"But poorly. I drink, as you perceive. I am scarcely arrived, and I have already levied a contribution of tisane upon Nantes."

"You should sleep first, monseigneur."

"Eh! corbleu! my dear Monsieur d'Artagnan, I should be very glad to sleep."

"Who hinders you?"

"Why, you in the first place."

"I? Oh, monseigneur!"

"No doubt you do. Is it at Nantes as at Paris? Do you not come in the king's name?"

"For Heaven's sake, monseigneur," replied the captain, "leave the king alone! The day on which I shall come on the part of the king, for the purpose you mean, take my word for it, I will not leave you long in doubt. You will see me place my hand on my sword, according to the ordonnance, and you will hear my say at once, in ceremonial voice, 'Monseigneur, in the name of the king, I arrest you!'"

"You promise me that frankness?" said the superintendent.

"Upon my honor! But we have not come to that, believe me."

"What makes you think that, M. d'Artagnan? For my part, I think quite the contrary."

"I have heard speak of nothing of the kind," replied D'Artagnan.

"Eh! eh!" said Fouquet.

"Indeed, no. You are an agreeable man, in spite of your fever. The king should not, cannot help loving you, at the bottom of his heart."

Fouquet's expression implied doubt. "But M. Colbert?" said he; "does M. Colbert love me as much as you say?"

"I am not speaking of M. Colbert," replied D'Artagnan. "He is an exceptional man. He does not love you; so much is very possible; but, mordieux! the squirrel can guard himself against the adder with very little trouble."

"Do you know that you are speaking to me quite as a friend?" replied Fouquet; "and that, upon my life! I have never met with a man of your intelligence, and heart?"

"You are pleased to say so," replied D'Artagnan. "Why did you wait till to-day to pay me such a compliment?"

"Blind that we are!" murmured Fouquet.

"Your voice is getting hoarse," said D'Artagnan; "drink, monseigneur, drink!" And he offered him a cup of tisane, with the most friendly cordiality; Fouquet took it, and thanked him by a gentle smile. "Such things only happen to me," said the musketeer. "I have passed ten years under your very beard, while you were rolling about tons of gold. You were clearing an annual pension of four millions; you never observed me; and you find out there is such a person in the world, just at the moment you--"

"Just at the moment I am about to fall," interrupted Fouquet. "That is true, my dear Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"I did not say so."

"But you thought so; and that is the same thing. Well! if I fall, take my word as truth, I shall not pass a single day without saying to myself, as I strike my brow, 'Fool! fool!--stupid mortal! You had a Monsieur d'Artagnan under your eye and hand, and you did not employ him, you did not enrich him!'"

"You overwhelm me," said the captain. "I esteem you greatly."

"There exists another man, then, who does not think as M. Colbert thinks," said the surintendant.

"How this M. Colbert looms up in your imagination! He is worse than fever!"

"Oh! I have good cause," said Fouquet. "Judge for yourself." And he related the details of the course of the lighters, and the hypocritical persecution of Colbert. "Is not this a clear sign of my ruin?"

D'Artagnan became very serious. "That is true," he said. "Yes; it has an unsavory odor, as M. de Treville used to say." And he fixed on M. Fouquet his intelligent and significant look.

"Am I not clearly designated in that, captain? Is not the king bringing me to Nantes to get me away from Paris, where I have so many creatures, and to possess himself of Belle-Isle?"

"Where M. d'Herblay is," added D'Artagnan. Fouquet raised his head. "As for me, monseigneur," continued D'Artagnan, "I can assure you the king has said nothing to me against you."

"Indeed!"

"The king commanded me to set out for Nantes, it is true; and to say nothing about it to M. de Gesvres."

"My friend."

"To M. de Gesvres, yes, monseigneur," continued the musketeer, whose eyes did not cease to speak a language different from the language of his lips. "The king, moreover, commanded me to take a brigade of musketeers, which is apparently superfluous, as the country is quite quiet."

"A brigade!" said Fouquet, raising himself upon his elbow.

"Ninety-six horsemen, yes, monseigneur. The same number as were employed in arresting MM. de Chalais, de Cinq-Mars, and Montmorency."

Fouquet pricked up his ears at these words, pronounced without apparent value. "And what else?" said he.

"Oh! nothing but insignificant orders; such as guarding the castle, guarding every lodging, allowing none of M. de Gesvres's guards to occupy a single post."

"And as to myself," cried Fouquet, "what orders had you?"

"As to you, monseigneur?--not the smallest word."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, my safety, my honor, perhaps my life are at stake. You would not deceive me?"

"I?--to what end? Are you threatened? Only there really is an order with respect to carriages and boats--"

"An order?"

"Yes; but it cannot concern you--a simple measure of police."

"What is it, captain?--what is it?"

"To forbid all horses or boats to leave Nantes, without a pass, signed by the king."

"Great God! but--"

D'Artagnan began to laugh. "All that is not to be put into execution before the arrival of the king at Nantes. So that you see plainly, monseigneur, the order in nowise concerns you."

Fouquet became thoughtful, and D'Artagnan feigned not to observe his preoccupation. "It is evident, by my thus confiding to you the orders which have been given to me, that I am friendly towards you, and that I am trying to prove to you that none of them are directed against you."

"Without doubt!--without doubt!" said Fouquet, still absent.

"Let us recapitulate," said the captain, his glance beaming with earnestness. "A special guard about the castle, in which your lodging is to be, is it not?"

"Do you know the castle?"

"Ah! monseigneur, a regular prison! The absence of M. de Gesvres, who has the honor of being one of your friends. The closing of the gates of the city, and of the river without a pass; but, only when the king shall have arrived. Please to observe, Monsieur Fouquet, that if, instead of speaking to man like you, who are one of the first in the kingdom, I were speaking to a troubled, uneasy conscience--I should compromise myself forever. What a fine opportunity for any one who wished to be free! No police, no guards, no orders; the water free, the roads free, Monsieur d'Artagnan obliged to lend his horses, if required. All this ought to reassure you, Monsieur Fouquet, for the king would not have left me thus independent, if he had any sinister designs. In truth, Monsieur Fouquet, ask me whatever you like, I am at your service; and, in return, if you will consent to do it, do me a service, that of giving my compliments to Aramis and Porthos, in case you embark for Belle-Isle, as you have a right to do without changing your dress, immediately, in your robe de chambre--just as you are." Saying these words, and with a profound bow, the musketeer, whose looks had lost none of their intelligent kindness, left the apartment. He had not reached the steps

of the vestibule, when Fouquet, quite beside himself, hung to the bell-rope, and shouted, "My horses!--my lighter!" But nobody answered. The surintendant dressed himself with everything that came to hand.

"Gourville!--Gourville!" cried he, while slipping his watch into his pocket. And the bell sounded again, whilst Fouquet repeated, "Gourville!--Gourville!"

Gourville at length appeared, breathless and pale.

"Let us be gone! Let us be gone!" cried Fouquet, as soon as he saw him.

"It is too late!" said the surintendant's poor friend.

"Too late!--why?"

"Listen!" And they heard the sounds of trumpets and drums in front of the castle.

"What does that mean, Gourville?"

"It means the king is come, monseigneur."

"The king!"

"The king, who has ridden double stages, who has killed horses, and who is eight hours in advance of all our calculations."

"We are lost!" murmured Fouquet. "Brave D'Artagnan, all is over, thou has spoken to me too late!"

The king, in fact, was entering the city, which soon resounded with the cannon from the ramparts, and from a vessel which replied from the lower parts of the river. Fouquet's brow darkened; he called his valets de chambre and dressed in ceremonial costume. From his window, behind the curtains, he could see the eagerness of the people, and the movement of a large troop, which had followed the prince. The king was conducted to the castle with great pomp, and Fouquet saw him dismount under the portcullis, and say something in the ear of D'Artagnan, who held his stirrup. D'Artagnan, when the king had passed under the arch, directed his steps towards the house Fouquet was in; but so slowly, and stopping so frequently to speak to his musketeers, drawn up like a hedge, that it might be said he was counting the seconds, or the steps, before accomplishing his object. Fouquet opened the window to speak to him in the court.

"Ah!" cried D'Artagnan, on perceiving him, "are you still there, monseigneur?"

And that word still completed the proof to Fouquet of how much information and how many useful counsels were contained in the first visit the musketeer had paid him. The surintendant sighed deeply. "Good heavens! yes, monsieur," replied he. "The arrival of the king has interrupted me in the projects I had formed."

"Oh, then you know that the king has arrived?"

"Yes, monsieur, I have seen him; and this time you come from him--"

"To inquire after you, monseigneur; and, if your health is not too bad, to beg you to have the kindness to repair to the castle."

"Directly, Monsieur d'Artagnan, directly!"

"Ah, mordioux!" said the captain, "now the king is come, there is no more walking for anybody--no more free will; the password governs all now, you as much as me, me as much as you."

Fouquet heaved a last sigh, climbed with difficulty into his carriage, so great was his weakness, and went to the castle, escorted by D'Artagnan, whose politeness was not less terrifying this time than it had just before been consoling and cheerful.