

Chapter XLIII. Explanations by Aramis.

"What I have to say to you, friend Porthos, will probably surprise you, but it may prove instructive."

"I like to be surprised," said Porthos, in a kindly tone; "do not spare me, therefore, I beg. I am hardened against emotions; don't fear, speak out."

"It is difficult, Porthos--difficult; for, in truth, I warn you a second time, I have very strange things, very extraordinary things, to tell you."

"Oh! you speak so well, my friend, that I could listen to you for days together. Speak, then, I beg--and--stop, I have an idea: I will, to make your task more easy, I will, to assist you in telling me such things, question you."

"I shall be pleased at your doing so."

"What are we going to fight for, Aramis?"

"If you ask me many such questions as that--if you would render my task the easier by interrupting my revelations thus, Porthos, you will not help me at all. So far, on the contrary, that is the very Gordian knot. But, my friend, with a man like you, good, generous, and devoted, the confession must be bravely made. I have deceived you, my worthy friend."

"You have deceived me!"

"Good Heavens! yes."

"Was it for my good, Aramis?"

"I thought so, Porthos; I thought so sincerely, my friend."

"Then," said the honest seigneur of Bracieux, "you have rendered me a service, and I thank you for it; for if you had not deceived me, I might have deceived myself. In what, then, have you deceived me, tell me?"

"In that I was serving the usurper against whom Louis XIV., at this moment, is directing his efforts."

"The usurper!" said Porthos, scratching his head. "That is--well, I do not quite clearly comprehend!"

"He is one of the two kings who are contending for the crown of France."

"Very well! Then you were serving him who is not Louis XIV.?"

"You have hit the matter in one word."

"It follows that--"

"It follows that we are rebels, my poor friend."

"The devil! the devil!" cried Porthos, much disappointed.

"Oh! but, dear Porthos, be calm, we shall still find means of getting out of the affair, trust me."

"It is not that which makes me uneasy," replied Porthos; "that which alone touches me is that ugly word rebels."

"Ah! but--"

"And so, according to this, the duchy that was promised me--"

"It was the usurper that was to give it to you."

"And that is not the same thing, Aramis," said Porthos, majestically.

"My friend, if it had only depended upon me, you should have become a prince."

Porthos began to bite his nails in a melancholy way.

"That is where you have been wrong," continued he, "in deceiving me; for that promised duchy I reckoned upon. Oh! I reckoned upon it seriously, knowing you to be a man of your word, Aramis."

"Poor Porthos! pardon me, I implore you!"

"So, then," continued Porthos, without replying to the bishop's prayer, "so then, it seems, I have quite fallen out with Louis XIV.?"

"Oh! I will settle all that, my good friend, I will settle all that. I will take it on myself alone!"

"Aramis!"

"No, no, Porthos, I conjure you, let me act. No false generosity! No inopportune devotedness! You knew nothing of my projects. You have done nothing of yourself. With me it is different. I alone am the author of this plot. I stood in need of my inseparable companion; I called upon you, and you came to me in remembrance of our ancient device, 'All for one, one for all.' My crime is that I was an egotist."

"Now, that is a word I like," said Porthos; "and seeing that you have acted entirely for yourself, it is impossible for me to blame you. It is natural."

And upon this sublime reflection, Porthos pressed his friend's hand cordially.

In presence of this ingenuous greatness of soul, Aramis felt his own littleness. It was the second time he had been compelled to bend before real superiority of heart, which is more imposing than brilliancy of mind. He replied by a mute and energetic pressure to the endearment of his friend.

"Now," said Porthos, "that we have come to an explanation, now that I am perfectly aware of our situation with respect to Louis XIV., I think, my friend, it is time to make me comprehend the political intrigue of which we are the victims--for I plainly see there is a political intrigue at the bottom of all this."

"D'Artagnan, my good Porthos, D'Artagnan is coming, and will detail it to you in all its circumstances; but, excuse me, I am deeply grieved, I am bowed down with mental anguish, and I have need of all my presence of mind, all my powers of reflection, to extricate you from the false position in which I have so imprudently involved you; but nothing can be more clear, nothing more plain, than your position, henceforth. The king Louis XIV. has no longer now but one enemy: that enemy is myself, myself alone. I have made you a prisoner, you have followed me, to-day I liberate you, you fly back to your prince. You can perceive, Porthos, there is not one difficulty in all this."

"Do you think so?" said Porthos.

"I am quite sure of it."

"Then why," said the admirable good sense of Porthos, "then why, if we are in such an easy position, why, my friend, do we prepare cannon, muskets, and engines of all sorts? It seems to me it would be much more simple to say to Captain d'Artagnan: 'My dear friend, we have been mistaken; that error is to be repaired; open the door to us, let us pass through, and we will say good-bye.'"

"Ah! that!" said Aramis, shaking his head.

"Why do you say 'that'? Do you not approve of my plan, my friend?"

"I see a difficulty in it."

"What is it?"

"The hypothesis that D'Artagnan may come with orders which will oblige us to defend ourselves."

"What! defend ourselves against D'Artagnan? Folly! Against the good D'Artagnan!"

Aramis once more replied by shaking his head.

"Porthos," at length said he, "if I have had the matches lighted and the guns pointed, if I have had the signal of alarm sounded, if I have called every man to his post upon the ramparts, those good ramparts of Belle-Isle which you have so well fortified, it was not for nothing. Wait to judge; or rather, no, do not wait--"

"What can I do?"

"If I knew, my friend, I would have told you."

"But there is one thing much more simple than defending ourselves:--a boat, and away for France--where--"

"My dear friend," said Aramis, smiling with a strong shade of sadness, "do not let us reason like children; let us be men in council and in execution.--But, hark! I hear a hail for landing at the port. Attention, Porthos, serious attention!"

"It is D'Artagnan, no doubt," said Porthos, in a voice of thunder, approaching the parapet.

"Yes, it is I," replied the captain of the musketeers, running lightly up the steps of the mole, and gaining rapidly the little esplanade on which his two friends waited for him. As soon as he came towards them, Porthos and Aramis observed an officer who followed D'Artagnan, treading apparently in his very steps. The captain stopped upon the stairs of the mole, when half-way up. His companions imitated him.

"Make your men draw back," cried D'Artagnan to Porthos and Aramis; "let them retire out of hearing." This order, given by Porthos, was executed immediately. Then D'Artagnan, turning towards him who followed him:

"Monsieur," said he, "we are no longer on board the king's fleet, where, in virtue of your order, you spoke so arrogantly to me, just now."

"Monsieur," replied the officer, "I did not speak arrogantly to you; I simply, but rigorously, obeyed instructions. I was commanded to follow you. I follow you. I am directed not to allow you to communicate with any one without taking cognizance of what you do; I am in duty bound, accordingly, to overhear your conversations."

D'Artagnan trembled with rage, and Porthos and Aramis, who heard this dialogue, trembled likewise, but with uneasiness and fear. D'Artagnan, biting his mustache with that vivacity which denoted in him exasperation, closely to be followed by an explosion, approached the officer.

"Monsieur," said he, in a low voice, so much the more impressive, that, affecting calm, it threatened tempest--"monsieur, when I sent a canoe hither, you wished to know what I wrote to the defenders of Belle-Isle. You produced an order to that effect; and, in my turn, I instantly showed you the note I had written. When the skipper of the boat sent by me returned, when I received the reply of these two gentlemen" (and he pointed to Aramis and Porthos), "you heard every word of what the messenger said. All that was plainly in your orders, all that was well executed, very punctually, was it not?"

"Yes, monsieur," stammered the officer; "yes, without doubt, but--"

"Monsieur," continued D'Artagnan, growing warm--"monsieur, when I manifested the intention of quitting my vessel to cross to Belle-Isle, you demanded to accompany me; I did not hesitate; I brought you with me. You are now at Belle-Isle, are you not?"

"Yes, monsieur; but--"

"But--the question no longer is of M. Colbert, who has given you that order, or of whomsoever in the world you are following the instructions; the question now is of a man who is a clog upon M. d'Artagnan, and who is alone with M. d'Artagnan upon steps whose feet are bathed by thirty feet of salt water; a bad position for that man, a bad position, monsieur! I warn you."

"But, monsieur, if I am a restraint upon you," said the officer, timidly, and almost faintly, "it is my duty which--"

"Monsieur, you have had the misfortune, either you or those that sent you, to insult me. It is done. I cannot seek redress from those who employ you,--they are unknown to me, or are at too great a distance. But you are under my hand, and I swear that if you make one step behind me when I raise my feet to go up to those gentlemen, I swear to you by my name, I will cleave your head in two with my sword, and pitch you into the water. Oh! it will happen! it will happen! I have only been six times angry in my life, monsieur, and all five preceding times I killed my man."

The officer did not stir; he became pale under this terrible threat, but replied with simplicity, "Monsieur, you are wrong in acting against my orders."

Porthos and Aramis, mute and trembling at the top of the parapet, cried to the musketeer, "Good D'Artagnan, take care!"

D'Artagnan made them a sign to keep silence, raised his foot with ominous calmness to mount the stair, and turned round, sword in hand, to see if the officer followed him. The officer made a sign of the cross and stepped up. Porthos and Aramis, who knew their D'Artagnan, uttered a cry, and rushed down to prevent the blow they thought they already heard. But D'Artagnan passed his sword into his left hand,--

"Monsieur," said he to the officer, in an agitated voice, "you are a brave man. You will all the better comprehend what I am going to say to you now."

"Speak, Monsieur d'Artagnan, speak," replied the officer.

"These gentlemen we have just seen, and against whom you have orders, are my friends."

"I know they are, monsieur."

"You can understand whether or not I ought to act towards them as your instructions prescribe."

"I understand your reserve."

"Very well; permit me, then, to converse with them without a witness."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, if I yield to your request, if I do that which you beg me, I break my word; but if I do not do it, I disoblige you. I prefer the one dilemma to the other. Converse with your friends, and do not despise me, monsieur, for doing this for your sake, whom I esteem and honor; do not despise me for committing for you, and you alone, an unworthy act." D'Artagnan, much agitated, threw his arm round the neck of the young man, and then went up to his friends. The officer, enveloped in his cloak, sat down on the damp, weed-covered steps.

"Well!" said D'Artagnan to his friends, "such is my position, judge for yourselves." All three embraced as in the glorious days of their youth.

"What is the meaning of all these preparations?" said Porthos.

"You ought to have a suspicion of what they signify," said D'Artagnan.

"Not any, I assure you, my dear captain; for, in fact, I have done nothing, no more has Aramis," the worthy baron hastened to say.

D'Artagnan darted a reproachful look at the prelate, which penetrated that hardened heart.

"Dear Porthos!" cried the bishop of Vannes.

"You see what is being done against you," said D'Artagnan; "interception of all boats coming to or going from Belle-Isle. Your means of transport seized. If you had endeavored to fly, you would have fallen into the hands of the cruisers that plow the sea in all directions, on the watch for you. The king wants you to be taken, and he will take you." D'Artagnan tore at his gray mustache. Aramis grew somber, Porthos angry.

"My idea was this," continued D'Artagnan: "to make you both come on board, to keep you near me, and restore you your liberty. But now, who can say, when I return to my ship, I may not find a superior; that I may not find secret orders which will take from me my command, and give it to another, who will dispose of me and you without hope of help?"

"We must remain at Belle-Isle," said Aramis, resolutely; "and I assure you, for my part, I will not surrender easily." Porthos said nothing. D'Artagnan remarked the silence of his friend.

"I have another trial to make of this officer, of this brave fellow who accompanies me, and whose courageous resistance makes me very happy; for it denotes an honest man, who, though an enemy, is a thousand times better than a complaisant coward. Let us try to learn from him what his instructions are, and what his orders permit or forbid."

"Let us try," said Aramis.

D'Artagnan went to the parapet, leaned over towards the steps of the mole, and called the officer, who immediately came up. "Monsieur," said D'Artagnan, after having exchanged the cordial courtesies natural between gentlemen who know and appreciate each other, "monsieur, if I wished to take away these gentlemen from here, what would you do?"

"I should not oppose it, monsieur; but having direct explicit orders to put them under guard, I should detain them."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan.

"That's all over," said Aramis, gloomily. Porthos did not stir.

"But still take Porthos," said the bishop of Vannes. "He can prove to the king, and I will help him do so, and you too, Monsieur d'Artagnan, that he had nothing to do with this affair."

"Hum!" said D'Artagnan. "Will you come? Will you follow me, Porthos? The king is merciful."

"I want time for reflection," said Porthos.

"You will remain here, then?"

"Until fresh orders," said Aramis, with vivacity.

"Until we have an idea," resumed D'Artagnan; "and I now believe that will not be long, for I have one already."

"Let us say adieu, then," said Aramis; "but in truth, my good Porthos, you ought to go."

"No," said the latter, laconically.

"As you please," replied Aramis, a little wounded in his susceptibilities at the morose tone of his companion. "Only I am reassured by the promise of an idea from D'Artagnan, an idea I fancy I have divined."

"Let us see," said the musketeer, placing his ear near Aramis's mouth. The latter spoke several words rapidly, to which D'Artagnan replied, "That is it, precisely."

"Infallible!" cried Aramis.

"During the first emotion this resolution will cause, take care of yourself, Aramis."

"Oh! don't be afraid."

"Now, monsieur," said D'Artagnan to the officer, "thanks, a thousand thanks! You have made yourself three friends for life."

"Yes," added Aramis. Porthos alone said nothing, but merely bowed.

D'Artagnan, having tenderly embraced his two old friends, left Belle-Isle with the inseparable companion with whom M. Colbert had saddled him. Thus, with the exception of the explanation with which the worthy Porthos had been willing to be satisfied, nothing had changed in appearance in the fate of one or the other, "Only," said Aramis, "there is D'Artagnan's idea."

D'Artagnan did not return on board without profoundly analyzing the idea he had discovered. Now, we know that whatever D'Artagnan did examine, according to custom, daylight was certain to illuminate. As to the officer, now grown mute again, he had full time for meditation. Therefore, on putting his foot on board his vessel, moored within cannon-shot of the island, the captain of the musketeers had already got together all his means, offensive and defensive.



He immediately assembled his council, which consisted of the officers serving under his orders. These were eight in number; a chief of the maritime forces; a major directing the artillery; an engineer, the officer we are acquainted with, and four lieutenants. Having assembled them, D'Artagnan arose, took of his hat, and addressed them thus:

"Gentlemen, I have been to reconnoiter Belle-Ile-en-Mer, and I have found in it a good and solid garrison; moreover, preparations are made for a defense that may prove troublesome. I therefore intend to send for two of the principal officers of the place, that we may converse with them. Having separated them from their troops and cannon, we shall be better able to deal with them; particularly by reasoning with them. Is not this your opinion, gentlemen?"

The major of artillery rose.

"Monsieur," said he, with respect, but firmness, "I have heard you say that the place is preparing to make a troublesome defense. The place is then, as you know, determined on rebellion?"

D'Artagnan was visibly put out by this reply; but he was not the man to allow himself to be subdued by a trifle, and resumed:

"Monsieur," said he, "your reply is just. But you are ignorant that Belle-Isle is a fief of M. Fouquet's, and that former monarchs gave the right to the seigneurs of Belle-Isle to arm their people." The major made a movement. "Oh! do not interrupt me," continued D'Artagnan. "You are going to tell me that that right to arm themselves against the English was not a right to arm themselves against their king. But it is not M. Fouquet, I suppose, who holds Belle-Isle at this moment, since I arrested M. Fouquet the day before yesterday. Now the inhabitants and defenders of Belle-Isle know nothing of this arrest. You would announce it to them in vain. It is a thing so unheard-of and extraordinary, so unexpected, that they would not believe you. A Breton serves his master, and not his masters; he serves his master till he has seen him dead. Now the Bretons, as far as I know, have not seen the body of M. Fouquet. It is not, then, surprising they hold out against that which is neither M. Fouquet nor his signature."

The major bowed in token of assent.

"That is why," continued D'Artagnan, "I propose to cause two of the principal officers of the garrison to come on board my vessel. They will see you, gentlemen; they will see the forces we have at our disposal; they will consequently know to what they have to trust, and the fate that attends them, in case of rebellion. We will affirm to them, upon our honor, that M. Fouquet is a prisoner, and that all resistance can only be prejudicial to them. We will tell them that at the first cannon fired, there will be no further hope of mercy from the king. Then, or so

at least I trust, they will resist no longer. They will yield up without fighting, and we shall have a place given up to us in a friendly way which it might cost prodigious efforts to subdue."

The officer who had followed D'Artagnan to Belle-Isle was preparing to speak, but D'Artagnan interrupted him.

"Yes, I know what you are going to tell me, monsieur; I know that there is an order of the king's to prevent all secret communications with the defenders of Belle-Isle, and that is exactly why I do not offer to communicate except in presence of my staff."

And D'Artagnan made an inclination of the head to his officers, who knew him well enough to attach a certain value to the condescension.

The officers looked at each other as if to read each other's opinions in their eyes, with the intention of evidently acting, should they agree, according to the desire of D'Artagnan. And already the latter saw with joy that the result of their consent would be sending a bark to Porthos and Aramis, when the king's officer drew from a pocket a folded paper, which he placed in the hands of D'Artagnan.

This paper bore upon its superscription the number 1.

"What, more!" murmured the surprised captain.

"Read, monsieur," said the officer, with a courtesy that was not free from sadness.

D'Artagnan, full of mistrust, unfolded the paper, and read these words: "Prohibition to M. d'Artagnan to assemble any council whatever, or to deliberate in any way before Belle-Isle be surrendered and the prisoners shot. Signed--LOUIS."

D'Artagnan repressed the quiver of impatience that ran through his whole body, and with a gracious smile:

"That is well, monsieur," said he; "the king's orders shall be complied with."