

Chapter XLIV. Result of the Ideas of the King, and the Ideas of D'Artagnan.

The blow was direct. It was severe, mortal. D'Artagnan, furious at having been anticipated by an idea of the king's, did not despair, however, even yet; and reflecting upon the idea he had brought back from Belle-Isle, he elicited therefrom novel means of safety for his friends.

"Gentlemen," said he, suddenly, "since the king has charged some other than myself with his secret orders, it must be because I no longer possess his confidence, and I should really be unworthy of it if I had the courage to hold a command subject to so many injurious suspicions. Therefore I will go immediately and carry my resignation to the king. I tender it before you all, enjoining you all to fall back with me upon the coast of France, in such a way as not to compromise the safety of the forces his majesty has confided to me. For this purpose, return all to your posts; within an hour, we shall have the ebb of the tide. To your posts, gentlemen! I suppose," added he, on seeing that all prepared to obey him, except the surveillant officer, "you have no orders to object, this time?"

And D'Artagnan almost triumphed while speaking these words. This plan would prove the safety of his friends. The blockade once raised, they might embark immediately, and set sail for England or Spain, without fear of being molested. Whilst they were making their escape, D'Artagnan would return to the king; would justify his return by the indignation which the mistrust of Colbert had raised in him; he would be sent back with full powers, and he would take Belle-Isle; that is to say, the cage, after the birds had flown. But to this plan the officer opposed a further order of the king's. It was thus conceived:

"From the moment M. d'Artagnan shall have manifested the desire of giving in his resignation, he shall no longer be reckoned leader of the expedition, and every officer placed under his orders shall be held to no longer obey him. Moreover, the said Monsieur d'Artagnan, having lost that quality of leader of the army sent against Belle-Isle, shall set out immediately for France, accompanied by the officer who will have remitted the message to him, and who will consider him a prisoner for whom he is answerable."

Brave and careless as he was, D'Artagnan turned pale. Everything had been calculated with a depth of precognition which, for the first time in thirty years, recalled to him the solid foresight and inflexible logic of the great cardinal. He leaned his head on his hand, thoughtful, scarcely breathing. "If I were to put this order in my pocket," thought he, "who would know it, what would prevent my doing it? Before the king had had time to be informed, I should have saved those poor fellows yonder. Let us exercise some small audacity! My head is not one of those the executioner strikes off for disobedience. We will disobey!" But at

the moment he was about to adopt this plan, he saw the officers around him reading similar orders, which the passive agent of the thoughts of that infernal Colbert had distributed to them. This contingency of his disobedience had been foreseen--as all the rest had been.

"Monsieur," said the officer, coming up to him, "I await your good pleasure to depart."

"I am ready, monsieur," replied D'Artagnan, grinding his teeth.

The officer immediately ordered a canoe to receive M. d'Artagnan and himself. At sight of this he became almost distraught with rage.

"How," stammered he, "will you carry on the directions of the different corps?"

"When you are gone, monsieur," replied the commander of the fleet, "it is to me the command of the whole is committed."

"Then, monsieur," rejoined Colbert's man, addressing the new leader, "it is for you that this last order remitted to me is intended. Let us see your powers."

"Here they are," said the officer, exhibiting the royal signature.

"Here are your instructions," replied the officer, placing the folded paper in his hands; and turning round towards D'Artagnan, "Come, monsieur," said he, in an agitated voice (such despair did he behold in that man of iron), "do me the favor to depart at once."

"Immediately!" articulated D'Artagnan, feebly, subdued, crushed by implacable impossibility.

And he painfully subsided into the little boat, which started, favored by wind and tide, for the coast of France. The king's guards embarked with him. The musketeer still preserved the hope of reaching Nantes quickly, and of pleading the cause of his friends eloquently enough to incline the king to mercy. The bark flew like a swallow. D'Artagnan distinctly saw the land of France profiled in black against the white clouds of night.

"Ah! monsieur," said he, in a low voice, to the officer to whom, for an hour, he had ceased speaking, "what would I give to know the instructions for the new commander! They are all pacific, are they not? and--"

He did not finish; the thunder of a distant cannon rolled athwart the waves, another, and two or three still louder. D'Artagnan shuddered.

"They have commenced the siege of Belle-Isle," replied the officer. The canoe had just touched the soil of France.