

Chapter LIII. King Louis XIV.

The king was seated in his cabinet, with his back turned towards the door of entrance. In front of him was a mirror, in which, while turning over his papers, he could see at a glance those who came in. He did not take any notice of the entrance of D'Artagnan, but spread above his letters and plans the large silk cloth he used to conceal his secrets from the importunate. D'Artagnan understood this by-play, and kept in the background; so that at the end of a minute the king, who heard nothing, and saw nothing save from the corner of his eye, was obliged to cry, "Is not M. d'Artagnan there?"

"I am here, sire," replied the musketeer, advancing.

"Well, monsieur," said the king, fixing his pellucid eyes on D'Artagnan, "what have you to say to me?"

"I, sire!" replied the latter, who watched the first blow of his adversary to make a good retort; "I have nothing to say to your majesty, unless it be that you have caused me to be arrested, and here I am."

The king was going to reply that he had not had D'Artagnan arrested, but any such sentence appeared too much like an excuse, and he was silent. D'Artagnan likewise preserved an obstinate silence.

"Monsieur," at length resumed the king, "what did I charge you to go and do at Belle-Isle? Tell me, if you please."

The king while uttering these words looked intently at his captain. Here D'Artagnan was fortunate; the king seemed to place the game in his hands.

"I believe," replied he, "that your majesty does me the honor to ask what I went to Belle-Isle to accomplish?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Well! sire, I know nothing about it; it is not of me that question should be asked, but of that infinite number of officers of all kinds, to whom have been given innumerable orders of all kinds, whilst to me, head of the expedition, nothing precise was said or stated in any form whatever."

The king was hurt: he showed it by his reply. "Monsieur," said he, "orders have only been given to such as were judged faithful."

"And, therefore, I have been astonished, sire," retorted the musketeer, "that a captain like myself, who ranks with a marechal of France, should have found himself under the orders of five or six lieutenants or

majors, good to make spies of, possibly, but not at all fit to conduct a warlike expedition. It was upon this subject I came to demand an explanation of your majesty, when I found the door closed against me, which, the final insult offered to a brave man, has led me to quit your majesty's service."

"Monsieur," replied the king, "you still believe that you are living in an age when kings were, as you complain of having been, under the orders and at the discretion of their inferiors. You seem to forget that a king owes an account of his actions to none but God."

"I forget nothing, sire," said the musketeer, wounded by this lesson. "Besides, I do not see in what an honest man, when he asks of his king how he has ill-served him, offends him."

"You have ill-served me, monsieur, by siding with my enemies against me."

"Who are your enemies, sire?"

"The men I sent you to fight."

"Two men the enemies of the whole of your majesty's army! That is incredible."

"You have no power to judge of my will."

"But I have to judge of my own friendships, sire."

"He who serves his friends does not serve his master."

"I so well understand this, sire, that I have respectfully offered your majesty my resignation."

"And I have accepted it, monsieur," said the king. "Before being separated from you I was willing to prove to you that I know how to keep my word."

"Your majesty has kept more than your word, for your majesty has had me arrested," said D'Artagnan, with his cold, bantering air; "you did not promise me that, sire."

The king would not condescend to perceive the pleasantry, and continued, seriously, "You see, monsieur, to what grave steps your disobedience forces me."

"My disobedience!" cried D'Artagnan, red with anger.

"It is the mildest term that I can find," pursued the king. "My idea was

to take and punish rebels; was I bound to inquire whether these rebels were your friends or not?"

"But I was," replied D'Artagnan. "It was a cruelty on your majesty's part to send me to capture my friends and lead them to your gibbets."

"It was a trial I had to make, monsieur, of pretended servants, who eat my bread and should defend my person. The trial has succeeded ill, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"For one bad servant your majesty loses," said the musketeer, with bitterness, "there are ten who, on that same day, go through a like ordeal. Listen to me, sire; I am not accustomed to that service. Mine is a rebel sword when I am required to do ill. It was ill to send me in pursuit of two men whose lives M. Fouquet, your majesty's preserver, implored you to save. Still further, these men were my friends. They did not attack your majesty, they succumbed to your blind anger. Besides, why were they not allowed to escape? What crime had they committed? I admit you may contest with me the right of judging their conduct. But why suspect me before the action? Why surround me with spies? Why disgrace me before the army? Why me, in whom till now you showed the most entire confidence--who for thirty years have been attached to your person, and have given you a thousand proofs of my devotion--for it must be said, now that I am accused--why reduce me to see three thousand of the king's soldiers march in battle against two men?"

"One would say you have forgotten what these men have done to me!" said the king, in a hollow voice, "and that it was no merit of theirs I was not lost."

"Sire, one would imagine you forget that I was there."

"Enough, Monsieur d'Artagnan, enough of these dominating interests which arise to keep the sun itself from my interests. I am founding a state in which there shall be but one master, as I promised you; the moment is at hand for me to keep my promise. You wish to be, according to your tastes or private friendships, free to destroy my plans and save my enemies? I will thwart you or will drop you--seek a more compliant master. I know full well that another king would not conduct himself as I do, and would allow himself to be dominated by you, at the risk of sending you some day to keep company with M. Fouquet and the rest; but I have an excellent memory, and for me, services are sacred titles to gratitude, to impunity. You shall only have this lesson, Monsieur d'Artagnan, as the punishment of your want of discipline, and I will not imitate my predecessors in anger, not having imitated them in favor. And, then, other reasons make me act mildly towards you; in the first place, because you are a man of sense, a man of excellent sense, a man of heart, and that you will be a capital servant to him who shall have mastered you; secondly, because you will cease to have any motives for

insubordination. Your friends are now destroyed or ruined by me. These supports on which your capricious mind instinctively relied I have caused to disappear. At this moment, my soldiers have taken or killed the rebels of Belle-Isle."

D'Artagnan became pale. "Taken or killed!" cried he. "Oh! sire, if you thought what you tell, if you were sure you were telling me the truth, I should forget all that is just, all that is magnanimous in your words, to call you a barbarous king, and an unnatural man. But I pardon you these words," said he, smiling with pride; "I pardon them to a young prince who does not know, who cannot comprehend what such men as M. d'Herblay, M. du Vallon, and myself are. Taken or killed! Ah! Ah! sire! tell me, if the news is true, how much has it cost you in men and money. We will then reckon if the game has been worth the stakes."

As he spoke thus, the king went up to him in great anger, and said, "Monsieur d'Artagnan, your replies are those of a rebel! Tell me, if you please, who is king of France? Do you know any other?"

"Sire," replied the captain of the musketeers, coldly, "I very well remember that one morning at Vaux you addressed that question to many people who did not answer to it, whilst I, on my part, did answer to it. If I recognized my king on that day, when the thing was not easy, I think it would be useless to ask the question of me now, when your majesty and I are alone."

At these words Louis cast down his eyes. It appeared to him that the shade of the unfortunate Philippe passed between D'Artagnan and himself, to evoke the remembrance of that terrible adventure. Almost at the same moment an officer entered and placed a dispatch in the hands of the king, who, in his turn, changed color, while reading it.

"Monsieur," said he, "what I learn here you would know later; it is better I should tell you, and that you should learn it from the mouth of your king. A battle has taken place at Belle-Isle."

"Is it possible?" said D'Artagnan, with a calm air, though his heart was beating fast enough to choke him. "Well, sire?"

"Well, monsieur--and I have lost a hundred and ten men."

A beam of joy and pride shone in the eyes of D'Artagnan. "And the rebels?" said he.

"The rebels have fled," said the king.

D'Artagnan could not restrain a cry of triumph. "Only," added the king, "I have a fleet which closely blockades Belle-Isle, and I am certain not a bark can escape."

"So that," said the musketeer, brought back to his dismal idea, "if these two gentlemen are taken--"

"They will be hanged," said the king, quietly.

"And do they know it?" replied D'Artagnan, repressing his trembling.

"They know it, because you must have told them yourself; and all the country knows it."

"Then, sire, they will never be taken alive, I will answer for that."

"Ah!" said the king, negligently, and taking up his letter again. "Very well, they will be dead, then, Monsieur d'Artagnan, and that will come to the same thing, since I should only take them to have them hanged."

D'Artagnan wiped the sweat which flowed from his brow.

"I have told you," pursued Louis XIV., "that I would one day be an affectionate, generous, and constant master. You are now the only man of former times worthy of my anger or my friendship. I will not spare you either sentiment, according to your conduct. Could you serve a king, Monsieur d'Artagnan, who should have a hundred kings, his equals, in the kingdom? Could I, tell me, do with such weak instruments the great things I meditate? Did you ever see an artist effect great works with an unworthy tool? Far from us, monsieur, the old leaven of feudal abuse! The Fronde, which threatened to ruin monarchy, has emancipated it. I am master at home, Captain d'Artagnan, and I shall have servants who, lacking, perhaps, your genius, will carry devotion and obedience to the verge of heroism. Of what consequence, I ask you, of what consequence is it that God has given no sense to arms and legs? It is to the head he has given genius, and the head, you know, the rest obey. I am the head."

D'Artagnan started. Louis XIV. continued as if he had seen nothing, although this emotion had not by any means escaped him. "Now, let us conclude between us two the bargain I promised to make with you one day when you found me in a very strange predicament at Blois. Do me justice, monsieur, when you admit I do not make any one pay for the tears of shame that I then shed. Look around you; lofty heads have bowed. Bow yours, or choose such exile as will suit you. Perhaps, when reflecting upon it, you will find your king has a generous heart, who reckons sufficiently upon your loyalty to allow you to leave him dissatisfied, when you possess a great state secret. You are a brave man; I know you to be so. Why have you judged me prematurely? Judge me from this day forward, D'Artagnan, and be as severe as you please."

D'Artagnan remained bewildered, mute, undecided for the first time in his life. At last he had found an adversary worthy of him. This was no

longer trick, it was calculation; no longer violence, but strength; no longer passion, but will; no longer boasting, but council. This young man who had brought down a Fouquet, and could do without a D'Artagnan, deranged the somewhat headstrong calculations of the musketeer.

"Come, let us see what stops you?" said the king, kindly. "You have given in your resignation; shall I refuse to accept it? I admit that it may be hard for such an old captain to recover lost good-humor."

"Oh!" replied D'Artagnan, in a melancholy tone, "that is not my most serious care. I hesitate to take back my resignation because I am old in comparison with you, and have habits difficult to abandon. Henceforward, you must have courtiers who know how to amuse you--madmen who will get themselves killed to carry out what you call your great works. Great they will be, I feel--but, if by chance I should not think them so? I have seen war, sire, I have seen peace; I have served Richelieu and Mazarin; I have been scorched with your father, at the fire of Rochelle; riddled with sword-thrusts like a sieve, having grown a new skin ten times, as serpents do. After affronts and injustices, I have a command which was formerly something, because it gave the bearer the right of speaking as he liked to his king. But your captain of the musketeers will henceforward be an officer guarding the outer doors. Truly, sire, if that is to be my employment from this time, seize the opportunity of our being on good terms, to take it from me. Do not imagine that I bear malice; no, you have tamed me, as you say; but it must be confessed that in taming me you have lowered me; by bowing me you have convicted me of weakness. If you knew how well it suits me to carry my head high, and what a pitiful mien I shall have while scenting the dust of your carpets! Oh! sire, I regret sincerely, and you will regret as I do, the old days when the king of France saw in every vestibule those insolent gentlemen, lean, always swearing--cross-grained mastiffs, who could bite mortally in the hour of danger or of battle. These men were the best of courtiers to the hand which fed them--they would lick it; but for the hand that struck them, oh! the bite that followed! A little gold on the lace of their cloaks, a slender stomach in their hauts-de-chausses, a little sparkling of gray in their dry hair, and you will behold the handsome dukes and peers, the haughty marechaux of France. But why should I tell you all this? The king is master; he wills that I should make verses, he wills that I should polish the mosaics of his ante-chambers with satin shoes. Mordioux! that is difficult, but I have got over greater difficulties. I will do it. Why should I do it? Because I love money?--I have enough. Because I am ambitious?--my career is almost at an end. Because I love the court? No. I will remain here because I have been accustomed for thirty years to go and take the orderly word of the king, and to have said to me 'Good evening, D'Artagnan,' with a smile I did not beg for. That smile I will beg for! Are you content, sire?" And D'Artagnan bowed his silver head, upon which the smiling king placed his white hand with pride.

"Thanks, my old servant, my faithful friend," said he. "As, reckoning from this day, I have no longer any enemies in France, it remains with me to send you to a foreign field to gather your marshal's baton. Depend upon me for finding you an opportunity. In the meanwhile, eat of my very best bread, and sleep in absolute tranquillity."

"That is all kind and well!" said D'Artagnan, much agitated. "But those poor men at Belle-Isle? One of them, in particular--so good! so brave! so true!"

"Do you ask their pardon of me?"

"Upon my knees, sire!"

"Well! then, go and take it to them, if it be still in time. But do you answer for them?"

"With my life, sire."

"Go, then. To-morrow I set out for Paris. Return by that time, for I do not wish you to leave me in the future."

"Be assured of that, sire," said D'Artagnan, kissing the royal hand.

And with a heart swelling with joy, he rushed out of the castle on his way to Belle-Isle.