

## Chapter LIV. M. Fouquet's Friends.

The king had returned to Paris, and with him D'Artagnan, who, in twenty-four hours, having made with greatest care all possible inquiries at Belle-Isle, succeeded in learning nothing of the secret so well kept by the heavy rock of Locmaria, which had fallen on the heroic Porthos. The captain of the musketeers only knew what those two valiant men--these two friends, whose defense he had so nobly taken up, whose lives he had so earnestly endeavored to save--aided by three faithful Bretons, had accomplished against a whole army. He had seen, spread on the neighboring heath, the human remains which had stained with clouted blood the scattered stones among the flowering broom. He learned also that a bark had been seen far out at sea, and that, like a bird of prey, a royal vessel had pursued, overtaken, and devoured the poor little bird that was flying with such palpitating wings. But there D'Artagnan's certainties ended. The field of supposition was thrown open. Now, what could he conjecture? The vessel had not returned. It is true that a brisk wind had prevailed for three days; but the corvette was known to be a good sailer and solid in its timbers; it had no need to fear a gale of wind, and it ought, according to the calculation of D'Artagnan, to have either returned to Brest, or come back to the mouth of the Loire. Such was the news, ambiguous, it is true, but in some degree reassuring to him personally, which D'Artagnan brought to Louis XIV., when the king, followed by all the court, returned to Paris.

Louis, satisfied with his success--Louis, more mild and affable as he felt himself more powerful--had not ceased for an instant to ride beside the carriage door of Mademoiselle de la Valliere. Everybody was anxious to amuse the two queens, so as to make them forget this abandonment by son and husband. Everything breathed the future, the past was nothing to anybody. Only that past was like a painful bleeding wound to the hearts of certain tender and devoted spirits. Scarcely was the king reinstalled in Paris, when he received a touching proof of this. Louis XIV. had just risen and taken his first repast when his captain of the musketeers presented himself before him. D'Artagnan was pale and looked unhappy. The king, at the first glance, perceived the change in a countenance generally so unconcerned. "What is the matter, D'Artagnan?" said he.

"Sire, a great misfortune has happened to me."

"Good heavens! what is that?"

"Sire, I have lost one of my friends, M. du Vallon, in the affair of Belle-Isle."

And, while speaking these words, D'Artagnan fixed his falcon eye upon Louis XIV., to catch the first feeling that would show itself.

"I knew it," replied the king, quietly.

"You knew it, and did not tell me!" cried the musketeer.

"To what good? Your grief, my friend, was so well worthy of respect. It was my duty to treat it gently. To have informed you of this misfortune, which I knew would pain you so greatly, D'Artagnan, would have been, in your eyes, to have triumphed over you. Yes, I knew that M. du Vallon had buried himself beneath the rocks of Locmaria; I knew that M. d'Herblay had taken one of my vessels with its crew, and had compelled it to convey him to Bayonne. But I was willing you should learn these matters in a direct manner, in order that you might be convinced my friends are with me respected and sacred; that always in me the man will sacrifice himself to subjects, whilst the king is so often found to sacrifice men to majesty and power."

"But, sire, how could you know?"

"How do you yourself know, D'Artagnan?"

"By this letter, sire, which M. d'Herblay, free and out of danger, writes me from Bayonne."

"Look here," said the king, drawing from a casket placed upon the table closet to the seat upon which D'Artagnan was leaning, "here is a letter copied exactly from that of M. d'Herblay. Here is the very letter, which Colbert placed in my hands a week before you received yours. I am well served, you may perceive."

"Yes, sire," murmured the musketeer, "you were the only man whose star was equal to the task of dominating the fortune and strength of my two friends. You have used your power, sire, you will not abuse it, will you?"

"D'Artagnan," said the king, with a smile beaming with kindness, "I could have M. d'Herblay carried off from the territories of the king of Spain, and brought here, alive, to inflict justice upon him. But, D'Artagnan, be assured I will not yield to this first and natural impulse. He is free--let him continue free."

"Oh, sire! you will not always remain so clement, so noble, so generous as you have shown yourself with respect to me and M. d'Herblay; you will have about you counselors who will cure you of that weakness."

"No, D'Artagnan, you are mistaken when you accuse my council of urging me to pursue rigorous measures. The advice to spare M. d'Herblay comes from Colbert himself."

"Oh, sire!" said D'Artagnan, extremely surprised.

"As for you," continued the king, with a kindness very uncommon to him, "I have several pieces of good news to announce to you; but you shall know them, my dear captain, the moment I have made my accounts all straight. I have said that I wish to make, and would make, your fortune; that promise will soon become reality."

"A thousand times thanks, sire! I can wait. But I implore you, whilst I go and practice patience, that your majesty will deign to notice those poor people who have for so long a time besieged your ante-chamber, and come humbly to lay a petition at your feet."

"Who are they?"

"Enemies of your majesty." The king raised his head.

"Friends of M. Fouquet," added D'Artagnan.

"Their names?"

"M. Gourville, M. Pelisson, and a poet, M. Jean de la Fontaine."

The king took a moment to reflect. "What do they want?"

"I do not know."

"How do they appear?"

"In great affliction."

"What do they say?"

"Nothing."

"What do they do?"

"They weep."

"Let them come in," said the king, with a serious brow.

D'Artagnan turned rapidly on his heel, raised the tapestry which closed the entrance to the royal chamber, and directing his voice to the adjoining room, cried, "Enter."

The three men D'Artagnan had named immediately appeared at the door of the cabinet in which were the king and his captain. A profound silence prevailed in their passage. The courtiers, at the approach of the friends of the unfortunate superintendent of finances, drew back, as if fearful of being affected by contagion with disgrace and misfortune. D'Artagnan, with a quick step, came forward to take by the hand the

unhappy men who stood trembling at the door of the cabinet; he led them in front of the king's fauteuil, who, having placed himself in the embrasure of a window, awaited the moment of presentation, and was preparing himself to give the supplicants a rigorously diplomatic reception.

The first of the friends of Fouquet's to advance was Pelisson. He did not weep, but his tears were only restrained that the king might better hear his voice and prayer. Gourville bit his lips to check his tears, out of respect for the king. La Fontaine buried his face in his handkerchief, and the only signs of life he gave were the convulsive motions of his shoulders, raised by his sobs.

The king preserved his dignity. His countenance was impassible. He even maintained the frown which appeared when D'Artagnan announced his enemies. He made a gesture which signified, "Speak;" and he remained standing, with his eyes fixed searchingly on these desponding men. Pelisson bowed to the ground, and La Fontaine knelt as people do in churches. This dismal silence, disturbed only by sighs and groans, began to excite in the king, not compassion, but impatience.

"Monsieur Pelisson," said he, in a sharp, dry tone. "Monsieur Gourville, and you, Monsieur--" and he did not name La Fontaine, "I cannot, without sensible displeasure, see you come to plead for one of the greatest criminals it is the duty of justice to punish. A king does not allow himself to soften save at the tears of the innocent, the remorse of the guilty. I have no faith either in the remorse of M. Fouquet or the tears of his friends, because the one is tainted to the very heart, and the others ought to dread offending me in my own palace. For these reasons, I beg you, Monsieur Pelisson, Monsieur Gourville, and you, Monsieur--, to say nothing that will not plainly proclaim the respect you have for my will."

"Sire," replied Pelisson, trembling at these words, "we are come to say nothing to your majesty that is not the most profound expression of the most sincere respect and love that are due to a king from all his subjects. Your majesty's justice is redoubtable; every one must yield to the sentences it pronounces. We respectfully bow before it. Far from us the idea of coming to defend him who has had the misfortune to offend your majesty. He who has incurred your displeasure may be a friend of ours, but he is an enemy to the state. We abandon him, but with tears, to the severity of the king."

"Besides," interrupted the king, calmed by that supplicating voice, and those persuasive words, "my parliament will decide. I do not strike without first having weighed the crime; my justice does not wield the sword without employing first a pair of scales."

"Therefore we have every confidence in that impartiality of the king,

and hope to make our feeble voices heard, with the consent of your majesty, when the hour for defending an accused friend strikes."

"In that case, messieurs, what do you ask of me?" said the king, with his most imposing air.

"Sire," continued Pelisson, "the accused has a wife and family. The little property he had was scarcely sufficient to pay his debts, and Madame Fouquet, since her husband's captivity, is abandoned by everybody. The hand of your majesty strikes like the hand of God. When the Lord sends the curse of leprosy or pestilence into a family, every one flies and shuns the abode of the leprous or plague-stricken. Sometimes, but very rarely, a generous physician alone ventures to approach the ill-reputed threshold, passes it with courage, and risks his life to combat death. He is the last resource of the dying, the chosen instrument of heavenly mercy. Sire, we supplicate you, with clasped hands and bended knees, as a divinity is supplicated! Madame Fouquet has no longer any friends, no longer any means of support; she weeps in her deserted home, abandoned by all those who besieged its doors in the hour of prosperity; she has neither credit nor hope left. At least, the unhappy wretch upon whom your anger falls receives from you, however culpable he may be, his daily bread though moistened by his tears. As much afflicted, more destitute than her husband, Madame Fouquet--the lady who had the honor to receive your majesty at her table--Madame Fouquet, the wife of the ancient superintendent of your majesty's finances, Madame Fouquet has no longer bread."

Here the mortal silence which had chained the breath of Pelisson's two friends was broken by an outburst of sobs; and D'Artagnan, whose chest heaved at hearing this humble prayer, turned round towards the angle of the cabinet to bite his mustache and conceal a groan.

The king had preserved his eye dry and his countenance severe; but the blood had mounted to his cheeks, and the firmness of his look was visibly diminished.

"What do you wish?" said he, in an agitated voice.

"We come humbly to ask your majesty," replied Pelisson, upon whom emotion was fast gaining, "to permit us, without incurring the displeasure of your majesty, to lend to Madame Fouquet two thousand pistoles collected among the old friends of her husband, in order that the widow may not stand in need of the necessaries of life."

At the word widow, pronounced by Pelisson whilst Fouquet was still alive, the king turned very pale;--his pride disappeared; pity rose from his heart to his lips; he cast a softened look upon the men who knelt sobbing at his feet.

"God forbid," said he, "that I should confound the innocent with the guilty. They know me but ill who doubt my mercy towards the weak. I strike none but the arrogant. Do, messieurs, do all that your hearts counsel you to assuage the grief of Madame Fouquet. Go, messieurs--go!"

The three now rose in silence with dry eyes. The tears had been scorched away by contact with their burning cheeks and eyelids. They had not the strength to address their thanks to the king, who himself cut short their solemn reverences by entrenching himself suddenly behind the fauteuil.

D'Artagnan remained alone with the king.

"Well," said he, approaching the young prince, who interrogated him with his look. "Well, my master! If you had not the device which belongs to your sun, I would recommend you one which M. Conrart might translate into eclectic Latin, 'Calm with the lowly; stormy with the strong.'"

The king smiled, and passed into the next apartment, after having said to D'Artagnan, "I give you the leave of absence you must want to put the affairs of your friend, the late M. du Vallon, in order."