

Chapter LVIII. The Angel of Death.

Athos was at this part of his marvelous vision, when the charm was suddenly broken by a great noise rising from the outer gates. A horse was heard galloping over the hard gravel of the great alley, and the sound of noisy and animated conversations ascended to the chamber in which the comte was dreaming. Athos did not stir from the place he occupied; he scarcely turned his head towards the door to ascertain the sooner what these noises could be. A heavy step ascended the stairs; the horse, which had recently galloped, departed slowly towards the stables. Great hesitation appeared in the steps, which by degrees approached the chamber. A door was opened, and Athos, turning a little towards the part of the room the noise came from, cried, in a weak voice:

"It is a courier from Africa, is it not?"

"No, monsieur le comte," replied a voice which made the father of Raoul start upright in his bed.

"Grimaud!" murmured he. And the sweat began to pour down his face. Grimaud appeared in the doorway. It was no longer the Grimaud we have seen, still young with courage and devotion, when he jumped the first into the boat destined to convey Raoul de Bragelonne to the vessels of the royal fleet. 'Twas now a stern and pale old man, his clothes covered with dust, and hair whitened by old age. He trembled whilst leaning against the door-frame, and was near falling on seeing, by the light of the lamps, the countenance of his master. These two men who had lived so long together in a community of intelligence, and whose eyes, accustomed to economize expressions, knew how to say so many things silently--these two old friends, one as noble as the other in heart, if they were unequal in fortune and birth, remained tongue-tied whilst looking at each other. By the exchange of a single glance they had just read to the bottom of each other's hearts. The old servitor bore upon his countenance the impression of a grief already old, the outward token of a grim familiarity with woe. He appeared to have no longer in use more than a single version of his thoughts. As formerly he was accustomed not to speak much, he was now accustomed not to smile at all. Athos read at a glance all these shades upon the visage of his faithful servant, and in the same tone he would have employed to speak to Raoul in his dream:

"Grimaud," said he, "Raoul is dead. Is it not so?"

Behind Grimaud the other servants listened breathlessly, with their eyes fixed upon the bed of their sick master. They heard the terrible question, and a heart-breaking silence followed.

"Yes," replied the old man, heaving the monosyllable from his chest with a hoarse, broken sigh.

Then arose voices of lamentation, which groaned without measure, and filled with regrets and prayers the chamber where the agonized father sought with his eyes the portrait of his son. This was for Athos like the transition which led to his dream. Without uttering a cry, without shedding a tear, patient, mild, resigned as a martyr, he raised his eyes towards Heaven, in order there to see again, rising above the mountain of Gigelli, the beloved shade that was leaving him at the moment of Grimaud's arrival. Without doubt, while looking towards the heavens, resuming his marvelous dream, he repassed by the same road by which the vision, at once so terrible and sweet, had led him before; for after having gently closed his eyes, he reopened them and began to smile: he had just seen Raoul, who had smiled upon him. With his hands joined upon his breast, his face turned towards the window, bathed by the fresh air of night, which brought upon its wings the aroma of the flowers and the woods, Athos entered, never again to come out of it, into the contemplation of that paradise which the living never see. God willed, no doubt, to open to this elect the treasures of eternal beatitude, at this hour when other men tremble with the idea of being severely received by the Lord, and cling to this life they know, in the dread of the other life of which they get but merest glimpses by the dismal murky torch of death. Athos was spirit-guided by the pure serene soul of his son, which aspired to be like the paternal soul. Everything for this just man was melody and perfume in the rough road souls take to return to the celestial country. After an hour of this ecstasy, Athos softly raised his hands as white as wax; the smile did not quit his lips, and he murmured low, so low as scarcely to be audible, these three words addressed to God or to Raoul:

"HERE I AM!"

And his hands fell slowly, as though he himself had laid them on the bed.

Death had been kind and mild to this noble creature. It had spared him the tortures of the agony, convulsions of the last departure; had opened with an indulgent finger the gates of eternity to that noble soul. God had no doubt ordered it thus that the pious remembrance of this death should remain in the hearts of those present, and in the memory of other men--a death which caused to be loved the passage from this life to the other by those whose existence upon this earth leads them not to dread the last judgment. Athos preserved, even in the eternal sleep, that placid and sincere smile--an ornament which was to accompany him to the tomb. The quietude and calm of his fine features made his servants for a long time doubt whether he had really quitted life. The comte's people wished to remove Grimaud, who, from a distance, devoured the face now quickly growing marble-pale, and did not approach, from pious fear of bringing to him the breath of death. But Grimaud, fatigued as he was, refused to leave the room. He sat himself down upon the threshold, watching his master with the vigilance of a sentinel, jealous to receive

either his first waking look or his last dying sigh. The noises all were quiet in the house--every one respected the slumber of their lord. But Grimaud, by anxiously listening, perceived that the comte no longer breathed. He raised himself with his hands leaning on the ground, looked to see if there did not appear some motion in the body of his master. Nothing! Fear seized him; he rose completely up, and, at the very moment, heard some one coming up the stairs. A noise of spurs knocking against a sword--a warlike sound familiar to his ears--stopped him as he was going towards the bed of Athos. A voice more sonorous than brass or steel resounded within three paces of him.

"Athos! Athos! my friend!" cried this voice, agitated even to tears.

"Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan," faltered out Grimaud.

"Where is he? Where is he?" continued the musketeer. Grimaud seized his arm in his bony fingers, and pointed to the bed, upon the sheets of which the livid tints of death already showed.

A choked respiration, the opposite to a sharp cry, swelled the throat of D'Artagnan. He advanced on tip-toe, trembling, frightened at the noise his feet made on the floor, his heart rent by a nameless agony. He placed his ear to the breast of Athos, his face to the comte's mouth. Neither noise, nor breath! D'Artagnan drew back. Grimaud, who had followed him with his eyes, and for whom each of his movements had been a revelation, came timidly; seated himself at the foot of the bed, and glued his lips to the sheet which was raised by the stiffened feet of his master. Then large drops began to flow from his red eyes. This old man in invincible despair, who wept, bent doubled without uttering a word, presented the most touching spectacle that D'Artagnan, in a life so filled with emotion, had ever met with.

The captain resumed standing in contemplation before that smiling dead man, who seemed to have burnished his last thought, to give his best friend, the man he had loved next to Raoul, a gracious welcome even beyond life. And for reply to that exalted flattery of hospitality, D'Artagnan went and kissed Athos fervently on the brow, and with his trembling fingers closed his eyes. Then he seated himself by the pillow without dread of that dead man, who had been so kind and affectionate to him for five and thirty years. He was feeding his soul with the remembrances the noble visage of the comte brought to his mind in crowds--some blooming and charming as that smile--some dark, dismal, and icy as that visage with its eyes now closed to all eternity.

All at once the bitter flood which mounted from minute to minute invaded his heart, and swelled his breast almost to bursting. Incapable of mastering his emotion, he arose, and tearing himself violently from the chamber where he had just found dead him to whom he came to report the

news of the death of Porthos, he uttered sobs so heart-rending that the servants, who seemed only to wait for an explosion of grief, answered to it by their lugubrious clamors, and the dogs of the late comte by their lamentable howlings. Grimaud was the only one who did not lift up his voice. Even in the paroxysm of his grief he would not have dared to profane the dead, or for the first time disturb the slumber of his master. Had not Athos always bidden him be dumb?

At daybreak D'Artagnan, who had wandered about the lower hall, biting his fingers to stifle his sighs--D'Artagnan went up once more; and watching the moments when Grimaud turned his head towards him, he made him a sign to come to him, which the faithful servant obeyed without making more noise than a shadow. D'Artagnan went down again, followed by Grimaud; and when he had gained the vestibule, taking the old man's hands, "Grimaud," said he, "I have seen how the father died; now let me know about the son."

Grimaud drew from his breast a large letter, upon the envelope of which was traced the address of Athos. He recognized the writing of M. de Beaufort, broke the seal, and began to read, while walking about in the first steel-chill rays of dawn, in the dark alley of old limes, marked by the still visible footsteps of the comte who had just died.