

Chapter 9

Explanations.

Aramis cleverly managed to effect a diversion for the purpose of finding D'Artagnan and Porthos. He came up to the latter, behind one of the columns, and, as he pressed his hand, said, "So you have escaped from my prison?"

"Do not scold him," said D'Artagnan; "it was I, dear Aramis, who set him free."

"Ah! my friend," replied Aramis, looking at Porthos, "could you not have waited with a little more patience?"

D'Artagnan came to the assistance of Porthos, who already began to breathe hard, in sore perplexity.

"You see, you members of the Church are great politicians; we mere soldiers come at once to the point. The facts are these: I went to pay Baisemeaux a visit - "

Aramis pricked up his ears at this announcement.

"Stay!" said Porthos; "you make me remember that I have a letter from Baisemeaux for you, Aramis." And Porthos held out the bishop the letter

we have already seen. Aramis begged to be allowed to read it, and read it without D'Artagnan feeling in the slightest degree embarrassed by the circumstance that he was so well acquainted with the contents of it. Besides, Aramis's face was so impenetrable, that D'Artagnan could not but admire him more than ever; after he had read it, he put the letter into his pocket with the calmest possible air.

"You were saying, captain?" he observed.

"I was saying," continued the musketeer, "that I had gone to pay Baisemeaux a visit on his majesty's service."

"On his majesty's service?" said Aramis.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "and, naturally enough, we talked about you and our friends. I must say that Baisemeaux received me coldly; so I soon took my leave of him. As I was returning, a soldier accosted me, and said (no doubt as he recognized me, notwithstanding I was in private clothes), 'Captain, will you be good enough to read me the name written on this envelope?' and I read, 'To Monsieur du Vallon, at M. Fouquet's house, Saint-Mande.' The deuce, I said to myself, Porthos has not returned, then, as I fancied, to Bell-Isle, or to Pierrefonds, but is at M. Fouquet's house, at Saint-Mande; and as M. Fouquet is not at Saint-Mande, Porthos must be quite alone, or, at all events, with Aramis; I will go and see Porthos, and I accordingly went to see Porthos."

"Very good," said Aramis, thoughtfully.

"You never told me that," said Porthos.

"I had no time, my friend."

"And you brought back Porthos with you to Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, to Planchet's house."

"Does Planchet live at Fontainebleau?" inquired Aramis.

"Yes, near the cemetery," said Porthos, thoughtlessly.

"What do you mean by 'near the cemetery?'" said Aramis, suspiciously.

"Come," thought the musketeer, "since there is to be a squabble, let us take advantage of it."

"Yes, the cemetery," said Porthos. "Planchet is a very excellent fellow, who makes very excellent preserves; but his house has windows which look out upon the cemetery. And a confoundedly melancholy prospect it is! So this morning - "

"This morning?" said Aramis, more and more excited.

D'Artagnan turned his back to them, and walked to the window, where he began to play a march upon one of the panes of glass.

"Yes, this morning we saw a man buried there."

"Ah!"

"Very depressing, was it not? I should never be able to live in a house where burials can always be seen from the window. D'Artagnan, on the contrary, seems to like it very much."

"So D'Artagnan saw it as well?"

"Not simply saw it; he literally never took his eyes off the whole time."

Aramis started, and turned to look at the musketeer, but the latter was engaged in earnest conversation with Saint-Aignan. Aramis continued to question Porthos, and when he had squeezed all the juice out of this enormous lemon, he threw the peel aside. He turned towards his friend D'Artagnan, and clapping him on the shoulder, when Saint-Aignan had left him, the king's supper having been announced, said, "D'Artagnan."

"Yes, my dear fellow," he replied.

"We do not sup with his majesty, I believe?"

"Well? - _we_ do."

"Can you give me ten minutes' conversation?"

"Twenty, if you like. His majesty will take quite that time to get properly seated at table."

"Where shall we talk, then?"

"Here, upon these seats if you like; the king has left, we can sit down, and the apartment is empty."

"Let us sit down, then."

They sat down, and Aramis took one of D'Artagnan's hands in his.

"Tell me, candidly, my dear friend, whether you have not counseled Porthos to distrust me a little?"

"I admit, I have, but not as you understand it. I saw that Porthos was bored to death, and I wished, by presenting him to the king, to do for him, and for you, what you would never do for yourselves."

"What is that?"

"Speak in your own praise."

"And you have done it most nobly; I thank you."

"And I brought the cardinal's hat a little nearer, just as it seemed to be retreating from you."

"Ah! I admit that," said Aramis, with a singular smile, "you are, indeed, not to be matched for making your friends' fortunes for them."

"You see, then, that I only acted with the view of making Porthos's fortune for him."

"I meant to have done that myself; but your arm reaches farther than ours."

It was now D'Artagnan's turn to smile.

"Come," said Aramis, "we ought to deal truthfully with each other. Do you still love me, D'Artagnan?"

"The same as I used to do," replied D'Artagnan, without compromising himself too much by this reply.

"In that case, thanks; and now, for the most perfect frankness," said Aramis; "you visited Belle-Isle on behalf of the king?"

"_Pardieu!_"

"You wished to deprive us of the pleasure of offering Belle-Isle completely fortified to the king."

"But before I could deprive you of that pleasure, I ought to have been made acquainted with your intention of doing so."

"You came to Belle-Isle without knowing anything?"

"Of you! yes. How the devil could I imagine that Aramis had become so clever an engineer as to be able to fortify like Polybius, or Archimedes?"

"True. And yet you smelt me out over yonder?"

"Oh! yes."

"And Porthos, too?"

"I did not divine that Aramis was an engineer. I was only able to guess that Porthos might have become one. There is a saying, one becomes an orator, one is born a poet; but it has never been said, one is born Porthos, and one becomes an engineer."

"Your wit is always amusing," said Aramis, coldly.

"Well, I will go on."

"Do. When you found out our secret, you made all the haste you could to communicate it to the king."

"I certainly made as much haste as I could, since I saw that you were making still more. When a man weighing two hundred and fifty pounds, as Porthos does, rides post; when a gouty prelate - I beg your pardon, but you yourself told me you were so - when a prelate scours the highway - I naturally suppose that my two friends, who did not wish to be communicative with me, had certain matters of the highest importance to conceal from me, and so I made as much haste as my leanness and the absence of gout would allow."

"Did it not occur to you, my dear friend, that you might be rendering Porthos and myself a very sad service?"

"Yes, I thought it not unlikely; but you and Porthos made me play a very ridiculous part at Belle-Isle."

"I beg your pardon," said Aramis.

"Excuse me," said D'Artagnan.

"So that," pursued Aramis, "you now know everything?"

"No, indeed."

"You know I was obliged to inform M. Fouquet of what had happened, in order that he would be able to anticipate what you might have to tell the king?"

"That is rather obscure."

"Not at all: M. Fouquet has his enemies - you will admit that, I suppose."

"Certainly."

"And one in particular."

"A dangerous one?"

"A mortal enemy. Well, in order to counteract that man's influence, it was necessary that M. Fouquet should give the king a proof of his great devotion to him, and of his readiness to make the greatest sacrifices. He surprised his majesty by offering him Belle-Isle. If you had been the first to reach Paris, the surprise would have been destroyed, it would have looked as if we had yielded to fear."

"I understand."

"That is the whole mystery," said Aramis, satisfied that he had at last quite convinced the musketeer.

"Only," said the latter, "it would have been more simple to have taken me aside, and said to me, 'My dear D'Artagnan, we are fortifying Belle-Isle, and intend to offer it to the king. Tell us frankly, for whom you are acting. Are you a friend of M. Colbert, or of M. Fouquet?' Perhaps I should not have answered you, but you would have added, - 'Are you my friend?' I should have said 'Yes.'" Aramis hung down his head. "In this way," continued D'Artagnan, "you would have paralyzed my movements, and I should have gone to the king, and said, 'Sire, M. Fouquet is fortifying Belle-Isle, and exceedingly well, too; but here is a note, which the governor of Belle-Isle gave me for your majesty;' or, 'M. Fouquet is about to wait upon your majesty to explain his intentions with regard to it.' I should not have been placed in an absurd position; you would have enjoyed the surprise so long planned, and we should not have had any occasion to look askant at each other when we met."

"While, on the contrary," replied Aramis, "you have acted altogether as one friendly to M. Colbert. And you really are a friend of his, I suppose?"

"Certainly not, indeed!" exclaimed the captain. "M. Colbert is a mean fellow, and I hate him as I used to hate Mazarin, but without fearing him."

"Well, then," said Aramis, "I love M. Fouquet, and his interests are mine. You know my position. I have no property or means whatever. M. Fouquet gave me several livings, a bishopric as well; M. Fouquet has served and obliged me like the generous-hearted man he is, and I know the world sufficiently well to appreciate a kindness when I meet with one. M. Fouquet has won my regard, and I have devoted myself to his service."

"You could not possibly do better. You will find him a very liberal master."

Aramis bit his lips; and then said, "The best a man could possibly have." He then paused for a minute, D'Artagnan taking good care not to interrupt him.

"I suppose you know how Porthos got mixed up in all this?"

"No," said D'Artagnan; "I am curious, of course, but I never question a friend when he wishes to keep a secret from me."

"Well, then, I will tell you."

"It is hardly worth the trouble, if the confidence is to bind me in any way."

"Oh! do not be afraid.; there is no man whom I love better than Porthos, because he is so simple-minded and good-natured. Porthos is so

straightforward in everything. Since I have become a bishop, I have looked for these primeval natures, which make me love truth and hate intrigue."

D'Artagnan stroked his mustache, but said nothing.

"I saw Porthos and again cultivated his acquaintance; his own time hanging idly on his hands, his presence recalled my earlier and better days without engaging me in any present evil. I sent for Porthos to come to Vannes. M. Fouquet, whose regard for me is very great, having learnt that Porthos and I were attached to each other by old ties of friendship, promised him increase of rank at the earliest promotion, and that is the whole secret."

"I shall not abuse your confidence," said D'Artagnan.

"I am sure of that, my dear friend; no one has a finer sense of honor than yourself."

"I flatter myself that you are right, Aramis."

"And now" - and here the prelate looked searchingly and scrutinizingly at his friend - "now let us talk of ourselves and for ourselves; will you become one of M. Fouquet's friends? Do not interrupt me until you know what that means."

"Well, I am listening."

"Will you become a marechal of France, peer, duke, and the possessor of a duchy, with a million of francs?"

"But, my friend," replied D'Artagnan, "what must one do to get all that?"

"Belong to M. Fouquet."

"But I already belong to the king."

"Not exclusively, I suppose."

"Oh! a D'Artagnan cannot be divided."

"You have, I presume, ambitions, as noble hearts like yours have."

"Yes, certainly I have."

"Well?"

"Well! I wish to be a marechal; the king will make me marechal, duke, peer; the king will make me all that."

Aramis fixed a searching look upon D'Artagnan.

"Is not the king master?" said D'Artagnan.

"No one disputes it; but Louis XIII. was master also."

"Oh! my dear friend, between Richelieu and Louis XIII. stood no D'Artagnan," said the musketeer, very quietly.

"There are many stumbling-blocks round the king," said Aramis.

"Not for the king's feet."

"Very likely not; still - "

"One moment, Aramis; I observe that every one thinks of himself, and never of his poor prince; I will maintain myself maintaining him."

"And if you meet with ingratitude?"

"The weak alone are afraid of that."

"You are quite certain of yourself?"

"I think so."

"Still, the king may some day have no further need for you!"

"On the contrary, I think his need of me will soon be greater than ever; and hearken, my dear fellow, if it became necessary to arrest a new Conde, who would do it? This - this alone in France!" and D'Artagnan struck his sword, which clanked sullenly on the tessellated floor.

"You are right," said Aramis, turning very pale; and then he rose and pressed D'Artagnan's hand.

"That is the last summons for supper," said the captain of the musketeers; "will you excuse me?"

Aramis threw his arm round the musketeer's neck, and said, "A friend like you is the brightest jewel in the royal crown." And they immediately separated.

"I was right," mused D'Artagnan; "there is, indeed, something strangely serious stirring."

"We must hasten the explosion," breathed the coming cardinal, "for D'Artagnan has discovered the existence of a plot."