

Chapter 48

M. de Mazarin's Receipt.

Fouquet would have uttered an exclamation of delight on seeing another friend arrive, if the cold air and averted aspect of Aramis had not restored all his reserve. "Are you going to join us at dessert?" he asked. "And yet you would be frightened, perhaps, at the noise which our wild friends here are making?"

"Monseigneur," replied Aramis, respectfully, "I will begin by begging you to excuse me for having interrupted this merry meeting; and then, I will beg you to give me, as soon as your pleasure is attended to, a moment's audience on matters of business."

As the word "business" had aroused the attention of some of the epicureans present, Fouquet rose, saying: "Business first of all, Monsieur d'Herblay; we are too happy when matters of business arrive only at the end of a meal."

As he said this, he took the hand of Madame de Belliere, who looked at him with a kind of uneasiness, and then led her to an adjoining *_salon_*, after having recommended her to the most reasonable of his guests. And then, taking Aramis by the arm, he led him towards his cabinet. As soon as Aramis was there, throwing aside the respectful air he had assumed, he threw himself into a chair, saying: "Guess whom I have seen this evening?"

"My dear chevalier, every time you begin in that manner, I am sure to hear you announce something disagreeable."

"Well, and this time you will not be mistaken, either, my dear friend," replied Aramis.

"Do not keep me in suspense," added Fouquet, phlegmatically.

"Well, then, I have seen Madame de Chevreuse."

"The old duchesse, do you mean?"

"Yes. "

"Her ghost, perhaps?"

"No, no; the old she-wolf herself."

"Without teeth?"

"Possibly, but not without claws."

"Well! what harm can she meditate against me? I am no miser with women who are not prudes. A quality always prized, even by the woman who no longer presumes to look for love."

"Madame de Chevreuse knows very well that you are not avaricious, since she wishes to draw some money of you."

"Indeed! under what pretext?"

"Oh! pretexts are never wanting with her. Let me tell you what it is: it seems that the duchesse has a good many letters of M. de Mazarin's in her possession."

"I am not surprised at that, for the prelate was gallant enough."

"Yes, but these letters have nothing whatever to do with the prelate's love affairs. They concern, it is said, financial matters rather."

"And accordingly they are less interesting."

"Do you not suspect what I mean?"

"Not at all."

"Have you never heard speak of a prosecution being instituted for an embezzlement, or appropriation rather, of public funds?"

"Yes, a hundred, nay, a thousand times. Ever since I have been engaged in public matters I have hardly heard of anything else. It is precisely your own case, when, as a bishop, people reproach you for impiety; or, as

a musketeer, for your cowardice; the very thing of which they are always accusing ministers of finance is the embezzlement of public funds."

"Very good; but take a particular instance, for the duchesse asserts that M. de Mazarin alludes to certain particular instances."

"What are they?"

"Something like a sum of thirteen millions of francs, of which it would be very difficult for you to define the precise nature of the employment."

"Thirteen millions!" said the superintendent, stretching himself in his armchair, in order to enable him the more comfortably to look up towards the ceiling. "Thirteen millions - I am trying to remember out of all those I have been accused of having stolen."

"Do not laugh, my dear monsieur, for it is very serious. It is positive that the duchesse has certain letters in her possession, and that these letters must be as she represents them, since she wished to sell them to me for five hundred thousand francs."

"Oh! one can have a very tolerable calumny got up for such a sum as that," replied Fouquet. "Ah! now I know what you mean," and he began to laugh very heartily.

"So much the better," said Aramis, a little reassured.

"I remember the story of those thirteen millions now. Yes, yes, I remember them quite well."

"I am delighted to hear it; tell me about them."

"Well, then, one day Signor Mazarin, Heaven rest his soul! made a profit of thirteen millions upon a concession of lands in the Valtelline; he canceled them in the registry of receipts, sent them to me, and then made me advance them to him for war expenses."

"Very good; then there is no doubt of their proper destination."

"No; the cardinal made me invest them in my own name, and gave me a receipt."

"You have the receipt?"

"Of course," said Fouquet, as he quietly rose from his chair, and went to his large ebony bureau inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold.

"What I most admire in you," said Aramis, with an air of great satisfaction, "is, your memory in the first place, then your self-possession, and, finally, the perfect order which prevails in your administration; you, of all men, too, who are by nature a poet."

"Yes," said Fouquet, "I am orderly out of a spirit of idleness, to save myself the trouble of looking after things, and so I know that Mazarin's receipt is in the third drawer under the letter M; I open the drawer, and place my hand upon the very paper I need. In the night, without a light, I could find it."

And with a confident hand he felt the bundle of papers which were piled up in the open drawer. "Nay, more than that," he continued, "I remember the paper as if I saw it; it is thick, somewhat crumpled, with gilt edges; Mazarin had made a blot upon the figure of the date. Ah!" he said, "the paper knows we are talking about it, and that we want it very much, and so it hides itself out of the way."

And as the superintendent looked into the drawer, Aramis rose from his seat.

"This is very singular," said Fouquet.

"Your memory is treacherous, my dear monseigneur; look in another drawer."

Fouquet took out the bundle of papers, and turned them over once more; he then grew very pale.

"Don't confine your search to that drawer," said Aramis; "look elsewhere."

"Quite useless; I have never made a mistake; no one but myself arranges any papers of mine of this nature; no one but myself ever opens this drawer, of which, besides, no one, myself excepted, is aware of the secret."

"What do you conclude, then?" said Aramis, agitated.

"That Mazarin's receipt has been stolen from me; Madame de Chevreuse was right, chevalier; I have appropriated the public funds, I have robbed the state coffers of thirteen millions of money; I am a thief, Monsieur d'Herblay."

"Nay, nay, do not get irritated - do not get excited."

"And why not, chevalier? surely there is every reason for it. If legal proceedings are well arranged, and a judgment given in accordance with them, your friend the superintendent will soon follow Montfaucon, his colleague Enguerrand de Marigny, and his predecessor, Semblancay."

"Oh!" said Aramis, smiling, "not so fast as that."

"And why not? why not so fast? What do you suppose Madame de Chevreuse

has done with those letters - for you refused them, I suppose?"

"Yes; at once. I suppose that she went and sold them to M. Colbert."

"Well?"

"I said I supposed so; I might have said I was sure of it, for I had her followed, and, when she left me, she returned to her own house, went out by a back door, and proceeded straight to the intendant's house in the Rue Croix des Petits-Champs."

"Legal proceedings will be instituted, then, scandal and dishonor will follow; and all will fall upon me like a thunderbolt, blindly, pitilessly."

Aramis approached Fouquet, who sat trembling in his chair, close to the open drawers; he placed his hand on his shoulder, and in an affectionate tone of voice, said: "Do not forget that the position of M. Fouquet can in no way be compared to that of Semblancay or of Marigny."

"And why not, in Heaven's name?"

"Because the proceedings against those ministers were determined, completed, and the sentence carried out, whilst in your case the same thing cannot take place."

"Another blow, why not? A peculator is, under any circumstances, a criminal."

"Criminals who know how to find a safe asylum are never in danger."

"What! make my escape? Fly?"

"No, I do not mean that; you forget that all such proceedings originate in the parliament, that they are instituted by the procureur-general, and that you are the procureur-general. You see that, unless you wish to condemn yourself - "

"Oh!" cried Fouquet, suddenly, dashing his fist upon the table.

"Well! what? what is the matter?"

"I am procureur-general no longer."

Aramis, at this reply, became as livid as death; he pressed his hands together convulsively, and with a wild, haggard look, which almost annihilated Fouquet, he said, laying a stress on every distinct syllable, "You are procureur-general no longer, do you say?"

"No."

"Since when?"

"Since the last four or five hours."

"Take care," interrupted Aramis, coldly; "I do not think you are in the full possession of your senses, my friend; collect yourself."

"I tell you," returned Fouquet, "that a little while ago, some one came to me, brought by my friends, to offer me fourteen hundred thousand francs for the appointment, and that I sold it."

Aramis looked as though he had been struck by lightning; the intelligent and mocking expression of his countenance assumed an aspect of such profound gloom and terror, that it had more effect upon the superintendent than all the exclamations and speeches in the world. "You had need of money, then?" he said, at last.

"Yes; to discharge a debt of honor." And in a few words, he gave Aramis an account of Madame de Belliere's generosity, and the manner in which he had thought it but right to discharge that act of generosity.

"Yes," said Aramis, "that is, indeed, a fine trait. What has it cost?"

"Exactly the fourteen hundred thousand francs - the price of my appointment."

"Which you received in that manner, without reflection. Oh, imprudent man!"

"I have not yet received the amount, but I shall to-morrow."

"It is not yet completed, then?"

"It must be carried out, though; for I have given the goldsmith, for twelve o'clock to-morrow, an order upon my treasury, into which the purchaser's money will be paid at six or seven o'clock."

"Heaven be praised!" cried Aramis, clapping his hands together, "nothing is yet completed, since you have not yet been paid."

"But the goldsmith?"

"You shall receive the fourteen hundred thousand francs from me, at a quarter before twelve."

"Stay a moment; it is at six o'clock, this very morning, that I am to sign."

"Oh! I will answer that you do not sign."

"I have given my word, chevalier."

"If you have given it, you will take it back again, that is all."

"Can I believe what I hear?" cried Fouquet, in a most expressive tone.

"Fouquet recall his word, after it has once been pledged!"

Aramis replied to the almost stern look of the minister by a look full of anger. "Monsieur," he said, "I believe I have deserved to be called a man of honor? As a soldier, I have risked my life five hundred times; as a priest I have rendered still greater services, both to the state and to my friends. The value of a word, once passed, is estimated according to the worth of the man who gives it. So long as it is in his own keeping, it is of the purest, finest gold; when his wish to keep it has passed away, it is a two-edged sword. With that word, therefore, he defends himself as with an honorable weapon, considering that, when he disregards his word, he endangers his life and incurs an amount of risk far greater than that which his adversary is likely to derive of profit. In such a case, monsieur, he appeals to Heaven and to justice."

Fouquet bent down his head, as he replied, "I am a poor, self-determined man, a true Breton born; my mind admires and fears yours. I do not say that I keep my word from a proper feeling only; I keep it, if you like, from custom, practice, pride, or what you will; but, at all events, the ordinary run of men are simple enough to admire this custom of mine; it is my sole good quality - leave me such honor as it confers."

"And so you are determined to sign the sale of the very appointment which can alone defend you against all your enemies."

"Yes, I shall sign."

"You will deliver yourself up, then, bound hand and foot, from a false notion of honor, which the most scrupulous casuists would disdain?"

"I shall sign," repeated Fouquet.

Aramis sighed deeply, and looked all round him with the impatient gesture of a man who would gladly dash something to pieces, as a relief to his feelings. "We have still one means left," he said; "and I trust you will not refuse me to make use of that."

"Certainly not, if it be loyal and honorable; as everything is, in fact, which you propose."

"I know nothing more loyal than the renunciation of your purchaser. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Certainly: but - "

"But! - if you allow me to manage the affair, I do not despair."

"Oh! you shall be absolutely master to do what you please."

"Whom are you in treaty with? What manner of man is it?"

"I am not aware whether you know the parliament."

"Most of its members. One of the presidents, perhaps?"

"No; only a counselor, of the name of Vanel."

Aramis became perfectly purple. "Vanel!" he cried, rising abruptly from his seat; "Vanel! the husband of Marguerite Vanel?"

"Exactly."

"Of your former mistress?"

"Yes, my dear fellow; she is anxious to be the wife of the procureur-general. I certainly owed poor Vanel that slight concession, and I am a gainer by it; since I, at the same time, can confer a pleasure on his wife."

Aramis walked straight up to Fouquet, and took hold of his hand. "Do you know," he said, very calmly, "the name of Madame Vanel's new lover?"

"Ah! she has a new lover, then? I was not aware of it; no, I have no idea what his name is."

"His name is M. Jean-Baptiste Colbert; he is intendant of the finances: he lives in the Rue Croix des Petits-Champs, where Madame de Chevreuse has been this evening to take him Mazarin's letters, which she wishes to sell."

"Gracious Heaven!" murmured Fouquet, passing his hand across his forehead, from which the perspiration was starting.

"You now begin to understand, do you not?"

"That I am utterly lost! - yes."

"Do you now think it worth while to be so scrupulous with regard to keeping your word?"

"Yes," said Fouquet.

"These obstinate people always contrive matters in such a way, that one cannot but admire them all the while," murmured Aramis.

Fouquet held out his hand to him, and, at the very moment, a richly ornamented tortoise-shell clock, supported by golden figures, which was standing on a console table opposite to the fireplace, struck six. The sound of a door being opened in the vestibule was heard, and Gourville came to the door of the cabinet to inquire if Fouquet would receive M. Vanel. Fouquet turned his eyes from the gaze of Aramis, and then desired that M. Vanel should be shown in.