

## Chapter 49

### Monsieur Colbert's Rough Draft.

Vanel, who entered at this stage of the conversation, was nothing less for Aramis and Fouquet than the full stop which completes a phrase. But, for Vanel, Aramis's presence in Fouquet's cabinet had quite another signification; and, therefore, at his first step into the room, he paused as he looked at the delicate yet firm features of the bishop of Vannes, and his look of astonishment soon became one of scrutinizing attention. As for Fouquet, a perfect politician, that is to say, complete master of himself, he had already, by the energy of his own resolute will, contrived to remove from his face all traces of the emotion which Aramis's revelation had occasioned. He was no longer, therefore, a man overwhelmed by misfortune and reduced to resort to expedients; he held his head proudly erect, and indicated by a gesture that Vanel could enter. He was now the first minister of the state, and in his own palace. Aramis knew the superintendent well; the delicacy of the feelings of his heart and the exalted nature of his mind no longer surprised him. He confined himself, then, for the moment - intending to resume later an active part in the conversation - to the performance of the difficult part of a man who looks on and listens, in order to learn and understand. Vanel was visibly overcome, and advanced into the middle of the cabinet, bowing to everything and everybody. "I am here," he said.

"You are punctual, Monsieur Vanel," returned Fouquet.

"In matters of business, monseigneur," replied Vanel, "I look upon exactitude as a virtue."

"No doubt, monsieur."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Aramis, indicating Vanel with his finger, but addressing himself to Fouquet; "this is the gentleman, I believe, who has come about the purchase of your appointment?"

"Yes, I am," replied Vanel, astonished at the extremely haughty tone in which Aramis had put the question; "but in what way am I to address you, who do me the honor - "

"Call me monseigneur," replied Aramis, dryly. Vanel bowed.

"Come, gentlemen, a truce to these ceremonies; let us proceed to the matter itself."

"Monseigneur sees," said Vanel, "that I am waiting your pleasure."

"On the contrary, I am waiting," replied Fouquet.

"What for, may I be permitted to ask, monseigneur?"

"I thought that you had perhaps something to say."

"Oh," said Vanel to himself, "he has reflected on the matter and I am lost." But resuming his courage, he continued, "No, monseigneur, nothing, absolutely nothing more than what I said to you yesterday, and which I am again ready to repeat to you now."

"Come, now, tell me frankly, Monsieur Vanel, is not the affair rather a burdensome one for you?"

"Certainly, monseigneur; fourteen hundred thousand francs is an important sum."

"So important, indeed," said Fouquet, "that I have reflected - "

"You have been reflecting, do you say, monseigneur?" exclaimed Vanel, anxiously.

"Yes; that you might not yet be in a position to purchase."

"Oh, monseigneur!"

"Do not make yourself uneasy on that score, Monsieur Vanel; I shall not blame you for a failure in your word, which evidently may arise from inability on your part."

"Oh, yes, monseigneur, you would blame me, and you would be right in doing so," said Vanel; "for a man must either be very imprudent, or a

fool, to undertake engagements which he cannot keep; and I, at least, have always regarded a thing agreed on as a thing actually carried out."

Fouquet colored, while Aramis uttered a "Hum!" of impatience.

"You would be wrong to exaggerate such notions as those, monsieur," said the superintendent; "for a man's mind is variable, and full of these very excusable caprices, which are, however, sometimes estimable enough; and a man may have wished for something yesterday of which he repents to-day."

Vanel felt a cold sweat trickle down his face. "Monseigneur!" he muttered.

Aramis, who was delighted to find the superintendent carry on the debate with such clearness and precision, stood leaning his arm upon the marble top of a console table and began to play with a small gold knife, with a malachite handle. Fouquet did not hasten to reply; but after a moment's pause, "Come, my dear Monsieur Vanel," he said, "I will explain to you how I am situated." Vanel began to tremble.

"Yesterday I wished to sell - "

"Monseigneur did more than wish to sell, he actually sold."

"Well, well, that may be so; but to-day I ask you the favor to restore me my word which I pledged you."

"I received your \_word\_ as a satisfactory assurance that it would be kept."

"I know that, and that is the reason why I now entreat you; do you understand me? I entreat you to restore it to me."

Fouquet suddenly paused. The words "I entreat you," the effect of which he did not immediately perceive, seemed almost to choke him as he uttered it. Aramis, still playing with his knife, fixed a look upon Vanel which seemed as if he wished to penetrate the recesses of his heart. Vanel simply bowed, as he said, "I am overcome, monseigneur, at the honor you do me to consult me upon a matter of business which is already completed; but - "

"Nay, do not say \_but\_, dear Monsieur Vanel."

"Alas! monseigneur, you see," he said, as he opened a large pocket-book, "I have brought the money with me, - the whole sum, I mean. And here, monseigneur, is the contract of sale which I have just effected of a property belonging to my wife. The order is authentic in every particular, the necessary signatures have been attached to it, and it is made payable at sight; it is ready money, in fact, and, in one word, the whole affair is complete."

"My dear Monsieur Vanel, there is not a matter of business in this world,

however important it may be, which cannot be postponed in order to oblige a man, who, by that means, might and would be made a devoted friend."

"Certainly," said Vanel, awkwardly.

"And much more justly acquired would that friend become, Monsieur Vanel, since the value of the service he had received would have been so considerable. Well, what do you say? what do you decide?"

Vanel preserved a perfect silence. In the meantime, Aramis had continued his close observation of the man. Vanel's narrow face, his deeply sunken eyes, his arched eyebrows, had revealed to the bishop of Vannes the type of an avaricious and ambitious character. Aramis's method was to oppose one passion by another. He saw that M. Fouquet was defeated - morally subdued - and so he came to his rescue with fresh weapons in his hands. "Excuse me, monseigneur," he said; "you forgot to show M. Vanel that his own interests are diametrically opposed to this renunciation of the sale."

Vanel looked at the bishop with astonishment; he had hardly expected to find an auxiliary in him. Fouquet also paused to listen to the bishop.

"Do you not see," continued Aramis, "that M. Vanel, in order to purchase your appointment, has been obliged to sell a property belonging to his wife; well, that is no slight matter; for one cannot displace, as he has done, fourteen or fifteen hundred thousand francs without some considerable loss, and very serious inconvenience."

"Perfectly true," said Vanel, whose secret Aramis had, with keen-sighted gaze, wrung from the bottom of his heart.

"Inconveniences such as these are matters of great expense and calculation, and whenever a man has money matters to deal with, the expenses are generally the very first thing thought of."

"Yes, yes," said Fouquet, who began to understand Aramis's meaning.

Vanel remained perfectly silent; he, too, had understood him. Aramis observed his coldness of manner and his silence. "Very good," he said to himself, "you are waiting, I see, until you know the amount; but do not fear, I shall send you such a flight of crowns that you cannot but capitulate on the spot."

"We must offer M. Vanel a hundred thousand crowns at once," said Fouquet, carried away by his generous feelings.

The sum was a good one. A prince, even, would have been satisfied with such a bonus. A hundred thousand crowns at that period was the dowry of a king's daughter. Vanel, however, did not move.

"He is a perfect rascal!" thought the bishop, "well, we must offer the five hundred thousand francs at once," and he made a sign to Fouquet accordingly.

"You seem to have spent more than that, dear Monsieur Vanel," said the superintendent. "The price of ready money is enormous. You must have made a great sacrifice in selling your wife's property. Well, what can I have been thinking of? I ought to have offered to sign you an order for five hundred thousand francs; and even in that case I shall feel that I am greatly indebted to you."

There was not a gleam of delight or desire on Vanel's face, which remained perfectly impassible; not a muscle of it changed in the slightest degree. Aramis cast a look almost of despair at Fouquet, and then, going straight up to Vanel and taking hold of him by the coat, in a familiar manner, he said, "Monsieur Vanel, it is neither the inconvenience, nor the displacement of your money, nor the sale of your wife's property even, that you are thinking of at this moment; it is something more important still. I can well understand it; so pay particular attention to what I am going to say."

"Yes, monseigneur," Vanel replied, beginning to tremble in every limb, as the prelate's eyes seemed almost ready to devour him.

"I offer you, therefore, in the superintendent's name, not three hundred thousand livres, nor five hundred thousand, but a million. A million – do you understand me?" he added, as he shook him nervously.

"A million!" repeated Vanel, as pale as death.



"A million; in other words, at the present rate of interest, an income of seventy thousand francs."

"Come, monsieur," said Fouquet, "you can hardly refuse that. Answer - do you accept?"

"Impossible," murmured Vanel.

Aramis bit his lips, and something like a cloud seemed to pass over his face. The thunder behind this cloud could easily be imagined. He still kept his hold on Vanel. "You have purchased the appointment for fifteen hundred thousand francs, I think. Well, you will receive these fifteen hundred thousand francs back again; by paying M. Fouquet a visit, and shaking hands with him on the bargain, you will have become a gainer of a million and a half. You get honor and profit at the same time, Monsieur Vanel."

"I cannot do it," said Vanel, hoarsely.

"Very well," replied Aramis, who had grasped Vanel so tightly by the coat that, when he let go his hold, Vanel staggered back a few paces, "very well; one can now see clearly enough your object in coming here."

"Yes," said Fouquet, "one can easily see that."

"But - " said Vanel, attempting to stand erect before the weakness of these two men of honor.

"Does the fellow presume to speak?" said Aramis, with the tone of an emperor.

"Fellow!" repeated Vanel.

"The scoundrel, I meant to say," added Aramis, who had now resumed his usual self-possession. "Come, monsieur, produce your deed of sale, - you have it about you, I suppose, in one of your pockets, already prepared, as an assassin holds his pistol or his dagger concealed under his cloak.

Vanel began to mutter something.

"Enough!" cried Fouquet. "Where is this deed?"

Vanel tremblingly searched in his pockets, and as he drew out his pocket-book, a paper fell out of it, while Vanel offered the other to Fouquet. Aramis pounced upon the paper which had fallen out, as soon as he recognized the handwriting. "I beg your pardon," said Vanel, "that is a rough draft of the deed."

"I see that very clearly," retorted Aramis, with a smile more cutting than a lash of a whip; "and what I admire most is, that this draft is in M. Colbert's handwriting. Look, monseigneur, look."

And he handed the draft to Fouquet, who recognized the truth of the fact; for, covered with erasures, with inserted words, the margins filled with additions, this deed - a living proof of Colbert's plot - had just revealed everything to its unhappy victim. "Well!" murmured Fouquet.

Vanel, completely humiliated, seemed as if he were looking for some hole wherein to hide himself.

"Well!" said Aramis, "if your name were not Fouquet, and if your enemy's name were not Colbert - if you had not this mean thief before you, I should say to you, 'Repudiate it;' such a proof as this absolves you from your word; but these fellows would think you were afraid; they would fear you less than they do; therefore sign the deed at once." And he held out a pen towards him.

Fouquet pressed Aramis's hand; but, instead of the deed which Vanel handed to him, he took the rough draft of it.

"No, not that paper," said Aramis, hastily; "this is the one. The other is too precious a document for you to part with."

"No, no!" replied Fouquet; "I will sign under M. Colbert's own handwriting even; and I write, 'The handwriting is approved of.'" He then signed, and said, "Here it is, Monsieur Vanel." And the latter seized the paper, dashed down the money, and was about to make his

escape.

"One moment," said Aramis. "Are you quite sure the exact amount is there? It ought to be counted over, Monsieur Vanel; particularly since M. Colbert makes presents of money to ladies, I see. Ah, that worthy M. Colbert is not so generous as M. Fouquet." And Aramis, spelling every word, every letter of the order to pay, distilled his wrath and his contempt, drop by drop, upon the miserable wretch, who had to submit to this torture for a quarter of an hour. He was then dismissed, not in words, but by a gesture, as one dismisses or discharges a beggar or a menial.

As soon as Vanel had gone, the minister and the prelate, their eyes fixed on each other, remained silent for a few moments.

"Well," said Aramis, the first to break the silence; "to what can that man be compared, who, at the very moment he is on the point of entering into a conflict with an enemy armed from head to foot, panting for his life, presents himself for the contest utterly defenseless, throws down his arms, and smiles and kisses his hands to his adversary in the most gracious manner? Good faith, M. Fouquet, is a weapon which scoundrels frequently make use of against men of honor, and it answers their purpose. Men of honor, ought, in their turn, also, to make use of dishonest means against such scoundrels. You would soon see how strong they would become, without ceasing to be men of honor."

"What they did would be termed the acts of a scoundrel," replied Fouquet.

"Far from that; it would be merely coquetting or playing with the truth. At all events, since you have finished with this Vanel; since you have deprived yourself of the happiness of confounding him by repudiating your word; and since you have given up, for the purpose of being used against yourself, the only weapon which can ruin you - "

"My dear friend," said Fouquet, mournfully, "you are like the teacher of philosophy whom La Fontaine was telling us about the other day; he saw a child drowning, and began to read him a lecture divided into three heads."

Aramis smiled as he said, "Philosophy - yes; teacher - yes; a drowning child - yes; but a child can be saved - you shall see. But first of all let us talk about business. Did you not some time ago," he continued, as Fouquet looked at him with a bewildered air, "speak to me about an idea you had of giving a fete at Vaux?"

"Oh!" said Fouquet, "that was when affairs were flourishing."

"A fete, I believe, to which the king invited himself of his own accord?"

"No, no, my dear prelate; a fete to which M. Colbert advised the king to invite himself."

"Ah - exactly; as it would be a *\_fete\_* of so costly a character that you would be ruined in giving it."

"Precisely so. In happier days, as I said just now, I had a kind of pride in showing my enemies how inexhaustible my resources were; I felt it a point of honor to strike them with amazement, by creating millions under circumstances where they imagined nothing but bankruptcies and failures would follow. But, at present, I am arranging my accounts with the state, with the king, with myself; and I must now become a mean, stingy man; I shall be able to prove to the world that I can act or operate with my deniers as I used to do with my bags of pistoles, and from to-morrow my equipages shall be sold, my mansions mortgaged, my expenses curtailed."

"From to-morrow," interrupted Aramis, quietly, "you will occupy yourself, without the slightest delay, with your *\_fete\_* at Vaux, which must hereafter be spoken of as one of the most magnificent productions of your most prosperous days."

"Are you mad, Chevalier d'Herblay?"

"I! do you think so?"

"What do you mean, then? Do you not know that a *\_fete\_* at Vaux, one of the very simplest possible character, would cost four or five millions?"

"I do not speak of a \_fete\_ of the very simplest possible character, my dear superintendent."

"But, since the \_fete\_ is to be given to the king," replied Fouquet, who misunderstood Aramis's idea, "it cannot be simple."

"Just so: it ought to be on a scale of the most unbounded magnificence."

"In that case, I shall have to spend ten or twelve millions."

"You shall spend twenty, if you require it," said Aramis, in a perfectly calm voice.

"Where shall I get them?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"That is my affair, monsieur le surintendant; and do not be uneasy for a moment about it. The money shall be placed at once at your disposal, the moment you have arranged the plans of your \_fete\_."

"Chevalier! chevalier!" said Fouquet, giddy with amazement, "whither are you hurrying me?"

"Across the gulf into which you were about to fall," replied the bishop of Vannes. "Take hold of my cloak, and throw fear aside."

"Why did you not tell me that sooner, Aramis? There was a day when, with

one million only, you could have saved me; whilst to-day - "

"Whilst to-day I can give you twenty," said the prelate. "Such is the case, however - the reason is very simple. On the day you speak of, I had not the million which you had need of at my disposal, whilst now I can easily procure the twenty millions we require."

"May Heaven hear you, and save me!"

Aramis resumed his usual smile, the expression of which was so singular.

"Heaven never fails to hear me," he said.

"I abandon myself to your unreservedly," Fouquet murmured.

"No, no; I do not understand it in that manner. I am unreservedly devoted to you. Therefore, as you have the clearest, the most delicate, and the most ingenious mind of the two, you shall have entire control over the fete, even to the very smallest details. Only - "

"Only?" said Fouquet, as a man accustomed to understand and appreciate the value of a parenthesis.

"Well, then, leaving the entire invention of the details to you, I shall reserve to myself a general superintendence over the execution."

"In what way?"



"I mean, that you will make of me, on that day, a major-domo, a sort of inspector-general, or factotum - something between a captain of the guard and manager or steward. I will look after the people, and will keep the keys of the doors. You will give your orders, of course: but will give them to no one but me. They will pass through my lips, to reach those for whom they are intended - you understand?"

"No, I am very far from understanding."

"But you agree?"

"Of course, of course, my friend."

"That is all I care about, then. Thanks; and now go and prepare your list of invitations."

"Whom shall I invite?"

"Everybody you know."