

Chapter 58

King and Noble.

The king endeavored to recover his self-possession as quickly as possible, in order to meet M. de la Fere with an untroubled countenance. He clearly saw it was not mere chance that had induced the comte's visit, he had some vague impression of its importance; but he felt that to a man of Athos's tone of mind, to one of such a high order of intellect, his first reception ought not to present anything either disagreeable or otherwise than kind and courteous. As soon as the king had satisfied himself that, as far as appearances went, he was perfectly calm again, he gave directions to the ushers to introduce the comte. A few minutes afterwards Athos, in full court dress, and with his breast covered with the orders that he alone had the right to wear at the court of France, presented himself with so grave and solemn an air that the king perceived, at the first glance, that he was not deceived in his anticipations. Louis advanced a step towards the comte, and, with a smile, held out his hand to him, over which Athos bowed with the air of the deepest respect.

"Monsieur le Comte de la Fere," said the king rapidly, "you are so seldom here, that it is a real piece of good fortune to see you."

Athos bowed and replied, "I should wish always to enjoy the happiness of being near your majesty."

The tone, however, in which this reply was conveyed, evidently signified, "I should wish to be one of your majesty's advisers, to save you the commission of faults." The king felt it so, and determined in this man's presence to preserve all the advantages which could be derived from his command over himself, as well as from his rank and position.

"I see you have something to say to me," he said.

"Had it not been so, I should not have presumed to present myself before your majesty."

"Speak quickly, I am anxious to satisfy you," returned the king, seating himself.

"I am persuaded," replied Athos, in a somewhat agitated tone of voice, "that your majesty will give me every satisfaction."

"Ah!" said the king, with a certain haughtiness of manner, "you have come to lodge a complaint here, then?"

"It would be a complaint," returned Athos, "only in the event of your majesty - but if you will deign to permit me, sire, I will begin the conversation from the very commencement."

"Do so, I am listening."

"Your majesty will remember that at the period of the Duke of Buckingham's departure, I had the honor of an interview with you."

"At or about that period, I think I remember you did; only, with regard to the subject of the conversation, I have quite forgotten it."

Athos started, as he replied. "I shall have the honor to remind your majesty of it. It was with regard to a formal demand I had addressed to you respecting a marriage which M. de Bragelonne wished to contract with Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Ah!" thought the king, "we have come to it now. - I remember," he said, aloud.

"At that period," pursued Athos, "your majesty was so kind and generous towards M. de Bragelonne and myself, that not a single word which then fell from your lips has escaped my memory; and, when I asked your majesty to accord me Mademoiselle de la Valliere's hand for M. de Bragelonne, you refused."

"Quite true," said Louis, dryly.

"Alleging," Athos hastened to say, "that the young lady had no position in society."

Louis could hardly force himself to listen with an appearance of royal

propriety.

"That," added Athos, "she had but little fortune."

The king threw himself back in his armchair.

"That her extraction was indifferent."

A renewed impatience on the part of the king.

"And little beauty," added Athos, pitilessly.

This last bolt buried itself deep in the king's heart, and made him almost bound from his seat.

"You have a good memory, monsieur," he said.

"I invariably have, on occasions when I have had the distinguished honor of an interview with your majesty," retorted the comte, without being in the least disconcerted.

"Very good: it is admitted that I said all that."

"And I thanked your majesty for your remarks at the time, because they testified an interest in M. de Bragelonne which did him much honor."

"And you may possibly remember," said the king, very deliberately, "that you had the greatest repugnance for this marriage."

"Quite true, sire."

"And that you solicited my permission, much against your own inclination?"

"Yes, sire."

"And finally, I remember, for I have a memory nearly as good as your own; I remember, I say, that you observed at the time: 'I do not believe that Mademoiselle de la Valliere loves M. de Bragelonne.' Is that true?"

The blow told well, but Athos did not draw back. "Sire," he said, "I have already begged your majesty's forgiveness; but there are certain particulars in that conversation which are only intelligible from the _denouement_."

"Well, what is the _denouement_, monsieur?"

"This: that your majesty then said, 'that you would defer the marriage out of regard for M. de Bragelonne's own interests.'"

The king remained silent. "M. de Bragelonne is now so exceedingly unhappy that he cannot any longer defer asking your majesty for a solution of the matter."

The king turned pale; Athos looked at him with fixed attention.

"And what," said the king, with considerable hesitation, "does M. de Bragelonne request?"

"Precisely the very thing that I came to ask your majesty for at my last audience, namely, your majesty's consent to his marriage."

The king remained perfectly silent. "The questions which referred to the different obstacles in the way are all now quite removed for us," continued Athos. "Mademoiselle de la Valliere, without fortune, birth, or beauty, is not the less on that account the only good match in the world for M. de Bragelonne, since he loves this young girl."

The king pressed his hands impatiently together. "Does your majesty hesitate?" inquired the comte, without losing a particle of either his firmness or his politeness.

"I do not hesitate - I refuse," replied the king.

Athos paused a moment, as if to collect himself: "I have had the honor," he said, in a mild tone, "to observe to your majesty that no obstacle now interferes with M. de Bragelonne's affections, and that his determination seems unalterable."

"There is my will - and that is an obstacle, I should imagine!"

"That is the most serious of all," Athos replied quickly.

"Ah!"

"And may we, therefore, be permitted to ask your majesty, with the greatest humility, your reason for this refusal?"

"The reason! - A question to me!" exclaimed the king.

"A demand, sire!"

The king, leaning with both his hands upon the table, said, in a deep tone of concentrated passion: "You have lost all recollection of what is usual at court. At court, please to remember, no one ventures to put a question to the king."

"Very true, sire; but if men do not question, they conjecture."

"Conjecture! What may that mean, monsieur?"

"Very frequently, sire, conjecture with regard to a particular subject implies a want of frankness on the part of the king - "

"Monsieur!"

"And a want of confidence on the part of the subject," pursued Athos, intrepidly.

"You forget yourself," said the king, hurried away by anger in spite of all his self-control.

"Sire, I am obliged to seek elsewhere for what I thought I should find in your majesty. Instead of obtaining a reply from you, I am compelled to make one for myself."

The king rose. "Monsieur le comte," he said, "I have now given you all the time I had at my disposal." This was a dismissal.

"Sire," replied the comte, "I have not yet had time to tell your majesty what I came with the express object of saying, and I so rarely see your majesty that I ought to avail myself of the opportunity."

"Just now you spoke rudely of conjectures; you are now becoming offensive, monsieur."

"Oh, sire! offend your majesty! I? - never! All my life through I have maintained that kings are above all other men, not only from their rank and power, but from their nobleness of heart and their true dignity of mind. I never can bring myself to believe that my sovereign, he who passed his word to me, did so with a mental reservation."

"What do you mean? what mental reservation do you allude to?"

"I will explain my meaning," said Athos, coldly. "If, in refusing Mademoiselle de la Valliere to Monsieur de Bragelonne, your majesty had some other object in view than the happiness and fortune of the vicomte - "

"You perceive, monsieur, that you are offending me."

"If, in requiring the vicomte to delay his marriage, your majesty's only object was to remove the gentleman to whom Mademoiselle de la Valliere was engaged - "

"Monsieur! monsieur!"

"I have heard it said so in every direction, sire. Your majesty's affection for Mademoiselle de la Valliere is spoken of on all sides."

The king tore his gloves, which he had been biting for some time. "Woe to those," he cried, "who interfere in my affairs. I have made up my mind to take a particular course, and I will break through every obstacle in my way."

"What obstacle?" said Athos.

The king stopped short, like a horse which, having taken the bit between his teeth and run away, finds it has slipped it back again, and that his career is checked. "I love Mademoiselle de la Valliere," he said suddenly, with mingled nobleness of feeling and passion.

"But," interrupted Athos, "that does not preclude your majesty from allowing M. de Bragelonne to marry Mademoiselle de la Valliere. The sacrifice is worthy of so great a monarch; it is fully merited by M. de Bragelonne, who has already rendered great service to your majesty, and who may well be regarded as a brave and worthy man. Your majesty, therefore, in renouncing the affection you entertain, offers a proof at once of generosity, gratitude, and good policy."

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere does not love M. de Bragelonne," said the king, hoarsely.

"Does your majesty know that to be the case?" remarked Athos, with a searching look.

"I do know it."

"Since a very short time, then; for doubtless, had your majesty known it when I first preferred my request, you would have taken the trouble to inform me of it."

"Since a very short time, it is true, monsieur."

Athos remained silent for a moment, and then resumed: "In that case, I do not understand why your majesty should have sent M. de Bragelonne to London. That exile, and most properly so, too, is a matter of astonishment to every one who regards your majesty's honor with sincere affection."

"Who presumes to impugn my honor, Monsieur de la Fere?"

"The king's honor, sire, is made up of the honor of his whole nobility. Whenever the king offends one of his gentlemen, that is, whenever he deprives him of the smallest particle of his honor, it is from him, from the king himself, that that portion of honor is stolen."

"Monsieur de la Fere!" said the king, haughtily.

"Sire, you sent M. de Bragelonne to London either before you were Mademoiselle de la Valliere's lover, or since you have become so."

The king, irritated beyond measure, especially because he felt that he was being mastered, endeavored to dismiss Athos by a gesture.

"Sire," replied the comte, "I will tell you all; I will not leave your presence until I have been satisfied by your majesty or by myself; satisfied if you prove to me that you are right, - satisfied if I prove to you that you are wrong. Nay, sire, you can but listen to me. I am

old now, and I am attached to everything that is really great and really powerful in your kingdom. I am of those who have shed their blood for your father and for yourself, without ever having asked a single favor either from yourself or from your father. I have never inflicted the slightest wrong or injury on any one in this world, and even kings are still my debtors. You can but listen to me, I repeat. I have come to ask you for an account of the honor of one of your servants whom you have deceived by a falsehood, or betrayed by want of heart of judgment. I know that these words irritate your majesty, but the facts themselves are killing us. I know that you are endeavoring to find some means whereby to chastise me for my frankness; but I know also the chastisement I will implore God to inflict upon you when I relate to Him your perjury and my son's unhappiness."

The king during these remarks was walking hurriedly to and fro, his hand thrust into the breast of his coat, his head haughtily raised, his eyes blazing with wrath. "Monsieur," he cried, suddenly, "if I acted towards you as a king, you would be already punished; but I am only a man, and I have the right to love in this world every one who loves me, - a happiness which is so rarely found."

"You cannot pretend to such a right as a man any more than as a king, sire; or if you intend to exercise that right in a loyal manner, you should have told M. de Bragelonne so, and not have exiled him."

"It is too great a condescension, monsieur, to discuss these things with

you," interrupted Louis XIV., with that majesty of air and manner he alone seemed able to give his look and his voice.

"I was hoping that you would reply to me," said the comte.

"You shall know my reply, monsieur."

"You already know my thoughts on the subject," was the Comte de la Fere's answer.

"You have forgotten you are speaking to the king, monsieur. It is a crime."

"You have forgotten you are destroying the lives of two men, sire. It is a mortal sin."

"Leave the room!"

"Not until I have said this: 'Son of Louis XIII., you begin your reign badly, for you begin it by abduction and disloyalty! My race - myself too - are now freed from all that affection and respect towards you, which I made my son swear to observe in the vaults of Saint-Denis, in the presence of the relics of your noble forefathers. You are now become our enemy, sire, and henceforth we have nothing to do save with Heaven alone, our sole master. Be warned, be warned, sire.'"

"What! do you threaten?"

"Oh, no," said Athos, sadly, "I have as little bravado as fear in my soul. The God of whom I spoke to you is now listening to me; He knows that for the safety and honor of your crown I would even yet shed every drop of blood twenty years of civil and foreign warfare have left in my veins. I can well say, then, that I threaten the king as little as I threaten the man; but I tell you, sire, you lose two servants; for you have destroyed faith in the heart of the father, and love in the heart of the son; the one ceases to believe in the royal word, the other no longer believes in the loyalty of the man, or the purity of woman: the one is dead to every feeling of respect, the other to obedience. Adieu!"

Thus saying, Athos broke his sword across his knee, slowly placed the two pieces upon the floor, and saluting the king, who was almost choking from rage and shame, he quitted the cabinet. Louis, who sat near the table, completely overwhelmed, was several minutes before he could collect himself; but he suddenly rose and rang the bell violently. "Tell M. d'Artagnan to come here," he said to the terrified ushers.