Chapter 64

What Took Place at the Louvre During the Supper at the Bastile.

M. de Saint-Aignan had executed the commission with which the king had intrusted him for La Valliere - as we have already seen in one of the preceding chapters; but, whatever his eloquence, he did not succeed in persuading the young girl that she had in the king a protector powerful enough for her under any combination of circumstances, and that she had no need of any one else in the world when the king was on her side. In point of fact, at the very first word which the favorite mentioned of the discovery of the famous secret, Louise, in a passion of tears, abandoned herself in utter despair to a sorrow which would have been far from flattering for the king, if he had been a witness of it from one of the corners of the room. Saint-Aignan, in his character of ambassador, felt almost as greatly offended at it as his master himself would have been, and returned to inform the king what he had seen and heard; and it is thus we find him, in a state of great agitation, in the presence of the king, who was, if possible, in a state of even greater flurry than himself.

"But," said the king to the courtier, when the latter had finished his report, "what did she decide to do? Shall I at least see her presently before supper? Will she come to me, or shall I be obliged to go to her room?"

"I believe, sire, that if your majesty wishes to see her, you will not only have to take the first step in advance, but will have to go the

whole way."

"That I do not mind. Do you think she has yet a secret fancy for young Bragelonne?" muttered the king between his teeth.

"Oh! sire, that is not possible; for it is you alone, I am convinced, Mademoiselle de la Valliere loves, and that, too, with all her heart.
But you know that De Bragelonne belongs to that proud race who play the part of Roman heroes."

The king smiled feebly; he knew how true the illustration was, for Athos had just left him.

"As for Mademoiselle de la Valliere," Saint-Aignan continued, "she was brought up under the care of the Dowager Madame, that is to say, in the greatest austerity and formality. This young engaged couple coldly exchanged their little vows in the prim presence of the moon and stars; and now, when they find they have to break those vows asunder, it plays the very deuce with them."

Saint-Aignan thought to have made the king laugh; but on the contrary, from a mere smile Louis passed to the greatest seriousness of manner. He already began to experience that remorse which the comte had promised D'Artagnan he would inflict upon him. He reflected that, in fact, these young persons had loved and sworn fidelity to each other; that one of the two had kept his word, and that the other was too conscientious not to

feel her perjury most bitterly. And his remorse was not unaccompanied; for bitter pangs of jealousy began to beset the king's heart. He did not say another word, and instead of going to pay a visit to his mother, or the queen, or Madame, in order to amuse himself a little, and make the ladies laugh, as he himself used to say, he threw himself into the huge armchair in which his august father Louis XIII. had passed so many weary days and years in company with Barradat and Cinq-Mars. Saint-Aignan perceived the king was not to be amused at that moment; he tried a last resource, and pronounced Louise's name, which made the king look up immediately. "What does your majesty intend to do this evening - shall Mademoiselle de la Valliere be informed of your intention to see her?"

"It seems she is already aware of that," replied the king. "No, no, Saint-Aignan," he continued, after a moment's pause, "we will both of us pass our time in thinking, and musing, and dreaming; when Mademoiselle de
la Valliere shall have sufficiently regretted what she now regrets, she will deign, perhaps, to give us some news of herself."

"Ah! sire, is it possible you can so misunderstand her heart, which is so full of devotion?"

The king rose, flushed from vexation and annoyance; he was a prey to jealousy as well as to remorse. Saint-Aignan was just beginning to feel that his position was becoming awkward, when the curtain before the door was raised. The king turned hastily round; his first idea was that a

letter from Louise had arrived; but, instead of a letter of love, he only saw his captain of musketeers, standing upright, and perfectly silent in the doorway. "M. d'Artagnan," he said, "ah! Well, monsieur?"

D'Artagnan looked at Saint-Aignan; the king's eyes took the same direction as those of his captain; these looks would have been clear to any one, and for a still greater reason they were so for Saint-Aignan. The courtier bowed and quitted the room, leaving the king and D'Artagnan alone.

"Is it done?" inquired the king.

"Yes, sire," replied the captain of the musketeers, in a grave voice, "it is done."

The king was unable to say another word. Pride, however, obliged him not to pause at what he had done; whenever a sovereign has adopted a decisive course, even though it be unjust, he is compelled to prove to all witnesses, and particularly to prove it to himself, that he was quite right all through. A good means for effecting that - an almost infallible means, indeed - is, to try and prove his victim to be in the wrong. Louis, brought up by Mazarin and Anne of Austria, knew better than any one else his vocation as a monarch; he therefore endeavored to prove it on the present occasion. After a few moment's pause, which he had employed in making silently to himself the same reflections which we have just expressed aloud, he said, in an indifferent tone: "What did the

comte say?"

"Nothing at all, sire."

"Surely he did not allow himself to be arrested without saying something?"

"He said he expected to be arrested, sire."

The king raised his head haughtily. "I presume," he said, "that M. le Comte de la Fere has not continued to play his obstinate and rebellious part."

"In the first place, sire, what do you wish to signify by _rebellious?_" quietly asked the musketeer. "A rebel, in the eyes of the king, is a man who not only allows himself to be shut up in the Bastile, but still more, who opposes those who do not wish to take him there."

"Who do not wish to take him there!" exclaimed the king. "What do you say, captain! Are you mad?"

"I believe not, sire."

"You speak of persons who did not wish to arrest M. de la Fere! Who are those persons, may I ask?"

"I should say those whom your majesty intrusted with that duty."

"But it was you whom I intrusted with it," exclaimed the king.

"Yes, sire; it was I."

"And yet you say that, despite my orders, you had the intention of not arresting the man who had insulted me!"

"Yes, sire - that was really my intention. I even proposed to the comte to mount a horse that I had prepared for him at the Barriere de la Conference."

"And what was your object in getting this horse ready?"

"Why, sire, in order that M. le Comte de la Fere might be able to reach Le Havre, and from that place make his escape to England."

"You betrayed me, then, monsieur?" cried the king, kindling with a wild pride.

"Exactly so."

There was nothing to say in answer to statements made in such a tone; the king was astounded at such an obstinate and open resistance on the part of D'Artagnan. "At least you had a reason, Monsieur d'Artagnan, for acting as you did?" said the king, proudly.

"I have always a reason for everything, sire."

"Your reason cannot be your friendship for the comte, at all events, - the only one that can be of any avail, the only one that could possibly excuse you, - for I placed you perfectly at your ease in that respect."

"Me, sire?"

"Did I not give you the choice to arrest, or not to arrest M. le Comte de la Fere?"

"Yes, sire, but - "

"But what?" exclaimed the king, impatiently.

"But you warned me, sire, that if I did not arrest him, your captain of the guard should do so."

"Was I not considerate enough towards you, from the very moment I did not compel you to obey me?"

"To me, sire, you were, but not to my friend, for my friend would be arrested all the same, whether by myself or by the captain of the guards."

"And this is your devotion, monsieur! a devotion which argues and

reasons. You are no soldier, monsieur!"

"I wait for your majesty to tell me what I am."

"Well, then - you are a Frondeur."

"And since there is no longer any Fronde, sire, in that case - "

"But if what you say is true - "

"What I say is always true, sire."

"What have you come to say to me, monsieur?"

"I have come to say to your majesty, 'Sire, M. de la Fere is in the Bastile.'"

"That is not your fault, it would seem."

"That is true, sire; but at all events he is there; and since he is there, it is important that your majesty should know it."

"Ah! Monsieur d'Artagnan, so you set your king at defiance."

"Sire - "

"Monsieur d'Artagnan! I warn you that you are abusing my patience."

"On the contrary, sire."

"What do you mean by 'on the contrary'?"

"I have come to get myself arrested, too."

"To get yourself arrested, - you!"

"Of course. My friend will get wearied to death in the Bastile by himself; and I have come to propose to your majesty to permit me to bear him company; if your majesty will but give me the word, I will arrest myself; I shall not need the captain of the guards for that, I assure you."

The king darted towards the table and seized hold of a pen to write the order for D'Artagnan's imprisonment. "Pay attention, monsieur, that this is forever," cried the king, in tones of sternest menace.

"I can quite believe that," returned the musketeer; "for when you have once done such an act as that, you will never be able to look me in the face again."

The king dashed down his pen violently. "Leave the room, monsieur!" he said.

"Not so, if it please your majesty."

"What is that you say?"

"Sire, I came to speak gently and temperately to your majesty; your majesty got into a passion with me; that is a misfortune; but I shall not the less on that account say what I had to say to you."

"Your resignation, monsieur, - your resignation!" cried the king.

"Sire, you know whether I care about my resignation or not, since at Blois, on the very day when you refused King Charles the million which my friend the Comte de la Fere gave him, I then tendered my resignation to your majesty."

"Very well, monsieur - do it at once!"

"No, sire; for there is no question of my resignation at the present moment. Your majesty took up your pen just now to send me to the Bastile, - why should you change your intention?"

"D'Artagnan! Gascon that you are! who is king, allow me to ask, - you or myself?"

"You, sire, unfortunately."

"What do you mean by 'unfortunately'?"

"Yes, sire; for if it were I - "

"If it were you, you would approve of M. d'Artagnan's rebellious conduct, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"Really!" said the king, shrugging his shoulders.

"And I should tell my captain of the musketeers," continued D'Artagnan, "I should tell him, looking at him all the while with human eyes, and not with eyes like coals of fire, 'M. d'Artagnan, I had forgotten that I was the king, for I descended from my throne in order to insult a gentleman.'"

"Monsieur," said the king, "do you think you can excuse your friend by exceeding him in insolence?"

"Oh! sire! I should go much further than he did," said D'Artagnan; "and it would be your own fault. I should tell you what he, a man full of the finest sense of delicacy, did not tell you; I should say - 'Sire, you have sacrificed his son, and he defended his son - you sacrificed himself; he addressed you in the name of honor, of religion, of virtue – you repulsed, drove him away, imprisoned him.' I should be harder than

he was, for I should say to you - 'Sire; it is for you to choose. Do you wish to have friends or lackeys - soldiers or slaves - great men or mere puppets? Do you wish men to serve you, or to bend and crouch before you? Do you wish men to love you, or to be afraid of you? If you prefer baseness, intrigue, cowardice, say so at once, sire, and we will leave you, - we who are the only individuals who are left, - nay, I will say more, the only models of the valor of former times; we who have done our duty, and have exceeded, perhaps, in courage and in merit, the men already great for posterity. Choose, sire! and that, too, without delay. Whatever relics remain to you of the great nobility, guard them with a jealous eye; you will never be deficient in courtiers. Delay not - and send me to the Bastile with my friend; for, if you did not know how to listen to the Comte de la Fere, whose voice is the sweetest and noblest in all the world when honor is the theme; if you do not know how to listen to D'Artagnan, the frankest and honestest voice of sincerity, you are a bad king, and to-morrow will be a poor king. And learn from me, sire, that bad kings are hated by their people, and poor kings are driven ignominiously away.' That is what I had to say to you, sire; you were wrong to drive me to say it."

The king threw himself back in his chair, cold as death, and as livid as a corpse. Had a thunderbolt fallen at his feet, he could not have been more astonished; he seemed as if his respiration had utterly ceased, and that he was at the point of death. The honest voice of sincerity, as D'Artagnan had called it, had pierced through his heart like a sword-blade.

D'Artagnan had said all he had to say. Comprehending the king's anger, he drew his sword, and, approaching Louis XIV. respectfully, he placed it on the table. But the king, with a furious gesture, thrust aside the sword, which fell on the ground and rolled to D'Artagnan's feet. Notwithstanding the perfect mastery which D'Artagnan exercised over himself, he, too, in his turn, became pale, and, trembling with indignation, said: "A king may disgrace a soldier, - he may exile him, and may even condemn him to death; but were he a hundred times a king, he has no right to insult him by casting a dishonor upon his sword! Sire, a king of France has never repulsed with contempt the sword of a man such as I am! Stained with disgrace as this sword now is, it has henceforth no other sheath than either your heart or my own! I choose my own, sire; and you have to thank Heaven and my own patience that I do so." Then snatching up his sword, he cried, "My blood be upon your head!" and, with a rapid gesture, he placed the hilt upon the floor and directed the point of the blade towards his breast. The king, however, with a movement far more rapid than that of D'Artagnan, threw his right arm around the musketeer's neck, and with his left hand seized hold of the blade by the middle, and returned it silently to the scabbard. D'Artagnan, upright, pale, and still trembling, let the king do all to the very end. Louis, overcome and softened by gentler feelings, returned to the table, took a pen in his hand, wrote a few lines, signed them, and then held it out to D'Artagnan.

"What is this paper, sire?" inquired the captain.

"An order for M. d'Artagnan to set the Comte de la Fere at liberty immediately."

D'Artagnan seized the king's hand, and imprinted a kiss upon it; he then folded the order, placed it in his belt, and quitted the room. Neither the king nor the captain had uttered a syllable.

"Oh, human heart! thou guide and director of kings," murmured Louis, when alone, "when shall I learn to read in your inmost recesses, as in the leaves of a book! Oh, I am not a bad king - nor am I poor king; I am but still a child, when all is said and done."