Chapter 65

Political Rivals.

D'Artagnan had promised M. de Baisemeaux to return in time for dessert, and he kept his word. They had just reached the finer and more delicate class of wines and liqueurs with which the governor's cellar had the reputation of being most admirably stocked, when the silver spurs of the captain resounded in the corridor, and he himself appeared at the threshold. Athos and Aramis had played a close game; neither of the two had been able to gain the slightest advantage over the other. They had supped, talked a good deal about the Bastile, of the last journey to Fontainebleau, of the intended _fete_ that M. Fouquet was about to give at Vaux; they had generalized on every possible subject; and no one, excepting Baisemeaux, had in the slightest degree alluded to private matters. D'Artagnan arrived in the very midst of the conversation, still pale and much disturbed by his interview with the king. Baisemeaux hastened to give him a chair; D'Artagnan accepted a glass of wine, and set it down empty. Athos and Aramis both remarked his emotion; as for Baisemeaux, he saw nothing more than the captain of the king's musketeers, to whom he endeavored to show every possible attention. But, although Aramis had remarked his emotion, he had not been able to guess the cause of it. Athos alone believed he had detected it. For him, D'Artagnan's return, and particularly the manner in which he, usually so impassible, seemed overcome, signified, "I have just asked the king something which the king has refused me." Thoroughly convinced that his conjecture was correct, Athos smiled, rose from the table, and made a

sign to D'Artagnan, as if to remind him that they had something else to do than to sup together. D'Artagnan immediately understood him, and replied by another sign. Aramis and Baisemeaux watched this silent dialogue, and looked inquiringly at each other. Athos felt that he was called upon to give an explanation of what was passing.

"The truth is, my friend," said the Comte de la Fere, with a smile, "that you, Aramis, have been supping with a state criminal, and you, Monsieur de Baisemeaux, with your prisoner."

Baisemeaux uttered an exclamation of surprise, and almost of delight; for he was exceedingly proud and vain of his fortress, and for his own individual profit, the more prisoners he had, the happier he was, and the higher in rank the prisoners happened to be, the prouder he felt. Aramis assumed the expression of countenance he thought the position justified, and said, "Well, dear Athos, forgive me, but I almost suspected what has happened. Some prank of Raoul and La Valliere, I suppose?"

"Alas!" said Baisemeaux.

"And," continued Aramis, "you, a high and powerful nobleman as you are, forgetful that courtiers now exist - you have been to the king, I suppose, and told him what you thought of his conduct?"

"Yes, you have guessed right."

"So that," said Baisemeaux, trembling at having supped so familiarly with a man who had fallen into disgrace with the king; "so that, monsieur le comte - "

"So that, my dear governor," said Athos, "my friend D'Artagnan will communicate to you the contents of the paper which I perceived just peeping out of his belt, and which assuredly can be nothing else than the order for my incarceration."

Baisemeaux held out his hand with his accustomed eagerness. D'Artagnan drew two papers from his belt, and presented one of them to the governor, who unfolded it, and then read, in a low tone of voice, looking at Athos over the paper, as he did so, and pausing from time to time: "'Order to detain, in my chateau of the Bastile, Monsieur le Comte de la Fere.' Oh, monsieur! this is indeed a very melancholy day for me."

"You will have a patient prisoner, monsieur," said Athos, in his calm, soft voice.

"A prisoner, too, who will not remain a month with you, my dear governor," said Aramis; while Baisemeaux, still holding the order in his hand, transcribed it upon the prison registry.

"Not a day, or rather not even a night," said D'Artagnan, displaying the second order of the king, "for now, dear M. de Baisemeaux, you will have the goodness to transcribe also this order for setting the comte

immediately at liberty."

"Ah!" said Aramis, "it is a labor that you have deprived me of, D'Artagnan;" and he pressed the musketeer's hand in a significant manner, at the same moment as that of Athos.

"What!" said the latter in astonishment, "the king sets me at liberty!"

"Read, my dear friend," returned D'Artagnan.

Athos took the order and read it. "It is quite true," he said.

"Are you sorry for it?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Oh, no, on the contrary. I wish the king no harm; and the greatest evil or misfortune that any one can wish kings, is that they should commit an act of injustice. But you have had a difficult and painful task, I know. Tell me, have you not, D'Artagnan?"

"I? not at all," said the musketeer, laughing: "the king does everything I wish him to do."

Aramis looked fixedly at D'Artagnan, and saw that he was not speaking the truth. But Baisemeaux had eyes for nothing but D'Artagnan, so great was his admiration for a man who seemed to make the king do all he wished.

"And does the king exile Athos?" inquired Aramis.

"No, not precisely; the king did not explain himself upon that subject," replied D'Artagnan; "but I think the comte could not well do better unless, indeed, he wishes particularly to thank the king - "

"No, indeed," replied Athos, smiling.

"Well, then, I think," resumed D'Artagnan, "that the comte cannot do better than to retire to his _own_ chateau. However, my dear Athos, you have only to speak, to tell me what you want. If any particular place of residence is more agreeable to you than another, I am influential enough, perhaps, to obtain it for you."

"No, thank you," said Athos; "nothing can be more agreeable to me, my dear friend, than to return to my solitude beneath my noble trees on the banks of the Loire. If Heaven be the overruling physician of the evils of the mind, nature is a sovereign remedy. And so, monsieur," continued Athos, turning again towards Baisemeaux, "I am now free, I suppose?"

"Yes, monsieur le comte, I think so - at least, I hope so," said the governor, turning over and over the two papers in question, "unless, however, M. d'Artagnan has a third order to give me."

"No, my dear Baisemeaux, no," said the musketeer; "the second is quite enough: we will stop there - if you please."

"Ah! monsieur le comte," said Baisemeaux addressing Athos, "you do not know what you are losing. I should have placed you among the thirty-franc prisoners, like the generals - what am I saying? - I mean among the fifty-francs, like the princes, and you would have supped every evening as you have done to-night."

"Allow me, monsieur," said Athos, "to prefer my own simpler fare." And then, turning to D'Artagnan, he said, "Let us go, my dear friend. Shall I have that greatest of all pleasures for me - that of having you as my companion?"

"To the city gate only," replied D'Artagnan, "after which I will tell you what I told the king: 'I am on duty.'"

"And you, my dear Aramis," said Athos, smiling; "will you accompany me? La Fere is on the road to Vannes."

"Thank you, my dear friend," said Aramis, "but I have an appointment in Paris this evening, and I cannot leave without very serious interests suffering by my absence."

"In that case," said Athos, "I must say adieu, and take my leave of you. My dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux, I have to thank you exceedingly for your kind and friendly disposition towards me, and particularly for the enjoyable specimen you have given me of the ordinary fare of the

Bastile." And, having embraced Aramis, and shaken hands with M. de Baisemeaux, and having received best wishes for a pleasant journey from them both, Athos set off with D'Artagnan.

Whilst the _denouement_ of the scene of the Palais Royal was taking place at the Bastile, let us relate what was going on at the lodgings of Athos and Bragelonne. Grimaud, as we have seen, had accompanied his master to Paris; and, as we have said, he was present when Athos went out; he had observed D'Artagnan gnaw the corners of his mustache; he had seen his master get into the carriage; he had narrowly examined both their countenances, and he had known them both for a sufficiently long period to read and understand, through the mask of their impassibility, that something serious was the matter. As soon as Athos had gone, he began to reflect; he then, and then only, remembered the strange manner in which Athos had taken leave of him, the embarrassment - imperceptible as it would have been to any but himself - of the master whose ideas were, to him, so clear and defined, and the expression of whose wishes was so precise. He knew that Athos had taken nothing with him but the clothes he had on him at the time; and yet he seemed to fancy that Athos had not left for an hour merely; or even for a day. A long absence was signified by the manner in which he pronounced the word "Adieu." All these circumstances recurred to his mind, with feelings of deep affection for Athos, with that horror of isolation and solitude which invariably besets the minds of those who love; and all these combined rendered poor Grimaud very melancholy, and particularly uneasy. Without being able to account to himself for what he did since his master's departure, he wandered

about the room, seeking, as it were, for some traces of him, like a faithful dog, who is not exactly uneasy about his absent master, but at least is restless. Only as, in addition to the instinct of the animal, Grimaud subjoined the reasoning faculties of the man, Grimaud therefore felt uneasy and restless too. Not having found any indication which could serve as a guide, and having neither seen nor discovered anything which could satisfy his doubts, Grimaud began to wonder what could possibly have happened. Besides, imagination is the resource, or rather the plague of gentle and affectionate hearts. In fact, never does a feeling heart represent its absent friend to itself as being happy or cheerful. Never does the dove that wings its flight in search of adventures inspire anything but terror at home.

Grimaud soon passed from uneasiness to terror; he carefully went over, in his own mind, everything that had taken place: D'Artagnan's letter to Athos, the letter which had seemed to distress Athos so much after he had read it; then Raoul's visit to Athos, which resulted in Athos desiring him (Grimaud) to get his various orders and his court dress ready to put on; then his interview with the king, at the end of which Athos had returned home so unusually gloomy; then the explanation between the father and the son, at the termination of which Athos had embraced Raoul with such sadness of expression, while Raoul himself went away equally weary and melancholy; and finally, D'Artagnan's arrival, biting, as if he were vexed, the end of his mustache, and leaving again in the carriage, accompanied by the Comte de la Fere. All this composed a drama in five acts very clearly, particularly for so analytical an observer as Grimaud.

The first step he took was to search in his master's coat for M. d'Artagnan's letter; he found the letter still there, and its contents were found to run as follows:

"MY DEAR FRIEND, - Raoul has been to ask me for some particulars about the conduct of Mademoiselle de la Valliere, during our young friend's residence in London. I am a poor captain of musketeers, and I am sickened to death every day by hearing all the scandal of the barracks and bedside conversations. If I had told Raoul all I believe, I know the poor fellow would have died of it; but I am in the king's service, and cannot relate all I hear about the king's affairs. If your heart tells you to do it, set off at once; the matter concerns you more than it does myself, and almost as much as Raoul."

Grimaud tore, not a handful, but a finger-and-thumbful of hair out of his head; he would have done more if his head of hair had been in a more flourishing condition.

"Yes," he said, "that is the key of the whole enigma. The young girl has been playing her pranks; what people say about her and the king is true, then; our young master has been deceived; he ought to know it. Monsieur le comte has been to see the king, and has told him a piece of his mind; and then the king sent M. d'Artagnan to arrange the affair. Ah! gracious goodness!" continued Grimaud, "monsieur le comte, I now remember, returned without his sword."

This discovery made the perspiration break out all over poor Grimaud's face. He did not waste any more time in useless conjecture, but clapped his hat on his head, and ran to Raoul's lodgings.

Raoul, after Louise had left him, had mastered his grief, if not his affection; and, compelled to look forward on that perilous road over which madness and revulsion were hurrying him, he had seen, from the very first glance, his father exposed to the royal obstinacy, since Athos had himself been the first to oppose any resistance to the royal will. At this moment, from a very natural sequence of feeling, the unhappy young man remembered the mysterious signs which Athos had made, and the unexpected visit of D'Artagnan; the result of the conflict between a sovereign and a subject revealed itself to his terrified vision. As D'Artagnan was on duty, that is, a fixture at his post without the possibility of leaving it, it was certainly not likely that he had come to pay Athos a visit merely for the pleasure of seeing him. He must have come to say something to him. This something in the midst of such painful conjectures must have been the news of either a misfortune or a danger. Raoul trembled at having been so selfish as to have forgotten his father for his affection; at having, in a word, passed his time in idle dreams, or in an indulgence of despair, at a time when a necessity existed for repelling such an imminent attack on Athos. The very idea nearly drove him frantic; he buckled on his sword and ran towards his father's lodgings. On his way there he encountered Grimaud, who, having

set off from the opposite pole, was running with equal eagerness in search of the truth. The two men embraced each other most warmly.

"Grimaud," exclaimed Raoul, "is the comte well?"

"Have you seen him?"

"No; where is he?"

"I am trying to find out."

"And M. d'Artagnan?"

"Went out with him."

"When?"

"Ten minutes after you did."

"In what way did they go out?"

"In a carriage."

"Where did they go?"

"I have no idea at all."

"Did my father take any money with him?"

"No."

"Or his sword?"

"No."

"I have an idea, Grimaud, that M. d'Artagnan came in order to - "

"Arrest monsieur le comte, do you not think, monsieur?"

"Yes, Grimaud."

"I could have sworn it."

"What road did they take?"

"The way leading towards the quay."

"To the Bastile, then?"

"Yes, yes."

"Quick, quick; let us run."

"Yes, let us not lose a moment."

"But where are we to go?" said Raoul, overwhelmed.

"We will go to M. d'Artagnan's first, we may perhaps learn something there."

"No; if they keep me in ignorance at my father's, they will do the same everywhere. Let us go to - Oh, good heavens! why, I must be mad to-day, Grimaud; I have forgotten M. du Vallon, who is waiting for and expecting me still."

"Where is he, then?"

"At the Minimes of Vincennes."

"Thank goodness, that is on the same side as the Bastile. I will run and saddle the horses, and we will go at once," said Grimaud.

"Do, my friend, do."