

Chapter 67

M. de Baisemeaux's "Society."

The reader has not forgotten that, on quitting the Bastile, D'Artagnan and the Comte de la Fere had left Aramis in close confabulation with Baisemeaux. When once these two guests had departed, Baisemeaux did not in the least perceive that the conversation suffered by their absence.

He used to think that wine after supper, and that of the Bastile in particular, was excellent, and that it was a stimulation quite sufficient to make any honest man talkative. But he little knew his Greatness, who was never more impenetrable than at dessert. His Greatness, however, perfectly understood M. de Baisemeaux, when he reckoned on making the governor discourse by the means which the latter regarded as efficacious. The conversation, therefore, without flagging in appearance, flagged in reality; for Baisemeaux not only had it nearly all to himself, but further, kept speaking only of that singular event, the incarceration of Athos, followed by so prompt an order to set him again at liberty. Nor, moreover, had Baisemeaux failed to observe that the two orders of arrest and of liberation, were both in the king's hand. But then, the king would not take the trouble to write similar orders except under pressing circumstances. All this was very interesting, and, above all, very puzzling to Baisemeaux; but as, on the other hand, all this was very clear to Aramis, the latter did not attach to the occurrence the same importance as did the worthy governor. Besides, Aramis rarely put himself out of the way for anything, and he had not yet told M. de Baisemeaux for what reason he had now done so. And so at the very climax

of Baisemeaux's dissertation, Aramis suddenly interrupted him.

"Tell me, my dear Baisemeaux," said he, "have you never had any other diversions at the Bastile than those at which I assisted during the two or three visits I have had the honor to pay you?"

This address was so unexpected that the governor, like a vane which suddenly receives an impulsion opposed to that of the wind, was quite dumbfounded at it. "Diversions!" said he; "but I take them continually, monseigneur."

"Oh, to be sure! And these diversions?"

"Are of every kind."

"Visits, no doubt?"

"No, not visits. Visits are not frequent at the Bastile."

"What, are visits rare, then?"

"Very much so."

"Even on the part of your society?"

"What do you term my society - the prisoners?"

"Oh, no! - your prisoners, indeed! I know well it is you who visit them, and not they you. By your society, I mean, my dear Baisemeaux, the society of which you are a member."

Baisemeaux looked fixedly at Aramis, and then, as if the idea which had flashed across his mind were impossible, "Oh," he said, "I have very little society at present. If I must own it to you, dear M. d'Herblay, the fact is, to stay at the Bastille appears, for the most part, distressing and distasteful to persons of the gay world. As for the ladies, it is never without a certain dread, which costs me infinite trouble to allay, that they succeed in reaching my quarters. And, indeed, how should they avoid trembling a little, poor things, when they see those gloomy dungeons, and reflect that they are inhabited by prisoners who - " And in proportion as the eyes of Baisemeaux concentrated their gaze on the face of Aramis, the worthy governor's tongue faltered more and more until it ended by stopping altogether.

"No, you don't understand me, my dear M. Baisemeaux; you don't understand

me. I do not at all mean to speak of society in general, but of a particular society - of the society, in a word - to which you are affiliated."

Baisemeaux nearly dropped the glass of muscat which he was in the act of raising to his lips. "Affiliated," cried he, "affiliated!"

"Yes, affiliated, undoubtedly," repeated Aramis, with the greatest self-possession. "Are you not a member of a secret society, my dear M. Baisemeaux?"

"Secret?"

"Secret or mysterious."

"Oh, M. d'Herblay!"

"Consider, now, don't deny it."

"But believe me."

"I believe what I know."

"I swear to you."

"Listen to me, my dear M. Baisemeaux; I say yes, you say no; one of us two necessarily says what is true, and the other, it inevitably follows, what is false."

"Well, and then?"

"Well, we shall come to an understanding presently."

"Let us see," said Baisemeaux; "let us see."

"Now drink your glass of muscat, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux," said Aramis. "What the devil! you look quite scared."

"No, no; not the least in the world; oh, no."

"Drink then." Baisemeaux drank, but he swallowed the wrong way.

"Well," resumed Aramis, "if, I say, you are not a member of a secret or mysterious society, which you like to call it - the epithet is of no consequence - if, I say, you are not a member of a society similar to that I wish to designate, well, then, you will not understand a word of what I am going to say. That is all."

"Oh! be sure beforehand that I shall not understand anything."

"Well, well!"

"Try, now; let us see!"

"That is what I am going to do."

"If, on the contrary, you are one of the members of this society, you will immediately answer me - yes or no."

"Begin your questions," continued Baisemeaux, trembling.

"You will agree, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux," continued Aramis, with the same impassibility, "that it is evident a man cannot be a member of a society, it is evident that he cannot enjoy the advantages it offers to the affiliated, without being himself bound to certain little services."

"In short," stammered Baisemeaux, "that would be intelligible, if - "

"Well," resumed Aramis, "there is in the society of which I speak, and of which, as it seems you are not a member - "

"Allow me," said Baisemeaux. "I should not like to say absolutely."

"There is an engagement entered into by all the governors and captains of fortresses affiliated to the order." Baisemeaux grew pale.

"Now the engagement," continued Aramis firmly, "is of this nature."

Baisemeaux rose, manifesting unspeakable emotion: "Go on, dear M. d'Herblay: go on," said he.

Aramis then spoke, or rather recited the following paragraph, in the same tone as if he had been reading it from a book: "The aforesaid captain or governor of a fortress shall allow to enter, when need shall arise, and

on demand of the prisoner, a confessor affiliated to the order." He stopped. Baisemeaux was quite distressing to look at, being so wretchedly pale and trembling. "Is not that the text of the agreement?" quietly asked Aramis.

"Monseigneur!" began Baisemeaux.

"Ah! well, you begin to understand, I think."

"Monseigneur," cried Baisemeaux, "do not trifle so with my unhappy mind! I find myself as nothing in your hands, if you have the malignant desire to draw from me the little secrets of my administration."

"Oh! by no means; pray undeceive yourself, dear M. Baisemeaux; it is not the little secrets of your administration, but those of your conscience that I aim at."

"Well, then, my conscience be it, dear M. d'Herblay. But have some consideration for the situation I am in, which is no ordinary one."

"It is no ordinary one, my dear monsieur," continued the inflexible Aramis, "if you are a member of this society; but it is a quite natural one if free from all engagement. You are answerable only to the king."

"Well, monsieur, well! I obey only the king, and whom else would you have a French nobleman obey?"

Aramis did not yield an inch, but with that silvery voice of his continued: "It is very pleasant," said he, "for a French nobleman, for a prelate of France, to hear a man of your mark express himself so loyally, dear De Baisemeaux, and having heard you to believe no more than you do."

"Have you doubted, monsieur?"

"I? oh, no!"

"And so you doubt no longer?"

"I have no longer any doubt that such a man as you, monsieur," said Aramis, gravely, "does not faithfully serve the masters whom he voluntarily chose for himself."

"Masters!" cried Baisemeaux.

"Yes, masters, I said."

"Monsieur d'Herblay, you are still jesting, are you not?"

"Oh, yes! I understand that it is a more difficult position to have several masters than one; but the embarrassment is owing to you, my dear Baisemeaux, and I am not the cause of it."

"Certainly not," returned the unfortunate governor, more embarrassed than ever; "but what are you doing? You are leaving the table?"

"Assuredly."

"Are you going?"

"Yes, I am going."

"But you are behaving very strangely towards me, monseigneur."

"I am behaving strangely - how do you make that out?"

"Have you sworn, then, to put me to the torture?"

"No, I should be sorry to do so."

"Remain, then."

"I cannot."

"And why?"

"Because I have no longer anything to do here; and, indeed, I have duties to fulfil elsewhere."

"Duties, so late as this?"

"Yes; understand me now, my dear De Baisemeaux: they told me at the place

whence I came, 'The aforesaid governor or captain will allow to enter, as need shall arise, on the prisoner's demand, a confessor affiliated with the order.' I came; you do not know what I mean, and so I shall return to tell them that they are mistaken, and that they must send me elsewhere."

"What! you are - " cried Baisemeaux, looking at Aramis almost in terror.

"The confessor affiliated to the order," said Aramis, without changing his voice.

But, gentle as the words were, they had the same effect on the unhappy governor as a clap of thunder. Baisemeaux became livid, and it seemed to him as if Aramis's beaming eyes were two forks of flame, piercing to the very bottom of his soul. "The confessor!" murmured he; "you, monseigneur, the confessor of the order!"

"Yes, I; but we have nothing to unravel together, seeing that you are not one of the affiliated."

"Monseigneur!"

"And I understand that, not being so, you refuse to comply with its command."

"Monseigneur, I beseech you, condescend to hear me."

"And wherefore?"

"Monseigneur, I do not say that I have nothing to do with the society."

"Ah! ah!"

"I say not that I refuse to obey."

"Nevertheless, M. de Baisemeaux, what has passed wears very much the air of resistance."

"Oh, no! monseigneur, no; I only wished to be certain."

"To be certain of what?" said Aramis, in a tone of supreme contempt.

"Of nothing at all, monseigneur." Baisemeaux lowered his voice, and bending before the prelate, said, "I am at all times and in all places at the disposal of my superiors, but - "

"Very good. I like you better thus, monsieur," said Aramis, as he resumed his seat, and put out his glass to Baisemeaux, whose hand

trembled so that he could not fill it. "You were saying 'but' - "
continued Aramis.

"But," replied the unhappy man, "having received no notice, I was very far from expecting it."

"Does not the Gospel say, 'Watch, for the moment is known only of God?' Do not the rules of the order say, 'Watch, for that which I will, you ought always to will also.' And what pretext will serve you now that you did not expect the confessor, M. de Baisemeaux?"

"Because, monseigneur, there is at present in the Bastille no prisoner ill."

Aramis shrugged his shoulders. "What do you know about that?" said he.

"But, nevertheless, it appears to me - "

"M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, turning round in his chair, "here is your servant, who wishes to speak with you;" and at this moment, De Baisemeaux's servant appeared at the threshold of the door.

"What is it?" asked Baisemeaux, sharply.

"Monsieur," said the man, "they are bringing you the doctor's return."

Aramis looked at De Baisemeaux with a calm and confident eye.

"Well," said he, "let the messenger enter."

The messenger entered, saluted, and handed in the report. Baisemeaux ran his eye over it, and raising his head, said in surprise, "No. 12 is ill!"

"How was it, then," said Aramis, carelessly, "that you told me everybody was well in your hotel, M. de Baisemeaux?" And he emptied his glass without removing his eyes from Baisemeaux.

The governor then made a sign to the messenger, and when he had quitted the room, said, still trembling, "I think that there is in the article, 'on the prisoner's demand.'"

"Yes, it is so," answered Aramis. "But see what it is they want with you now."

And that moment a sergeant put his head in at the door. "What do you want now?" cried Baisemeaux. "Can you not leave me in peace for ten minutes?"

"Monsieur," said the sergeant, "the sick man, No. 12, has commissioned the turnkey to request you to send him a confessor."

Baisemeaux very nearly sank on the floor; but Aramis disdained to

reassure him, just as he had disdained to terrify him. "What must I answer?" inquired Baisemeaux.

"Just what you please," replied Aramis, compressing his lips; "that is your business. I am not the governor of the Bastile."

"Tell the prisoner," cried Baisemeaux, quickly, - "tell the prisoner that his request is granted." The sergeant left the room. "Oh! monseigneur, monseigneur," murmured Baisemeaux, "how could I have suspected! - how could I have foreseen this!"

"Who requested you to suspect, and who besought you to foresee?" contemptuously answered Aramis. "The order suspects; the order knows; the order foresees - is that not enough?"

"What is it you command?" added Baisemeaux.

"I? - nothing at all. I am nothing but a poor priest, a simple confessor. Have I your orders to go and see the sufferer?"

"Oh, monseigneur, I do not order; I pray you to go."

"'Tis well; conduct me to him."

The End