

Chapter 24

The Breakfast at Monsieur de Baisemeaux's.

Aramis was generally temperate; but on this occasion, while taking every care of his constitution, he did ample justice to Baisemeaux's breakfast, which, in all respects, was most excellent. The latter on his side, was animated with the wildest gayety; the sight of the five thousand pistoles, which he glanced at from time to time, seemed to open his heart. Every now and then he looked at Aramis with an expression of the deepest gratitude; while the latter, leaning back in his chair, took a few sips of wine from his glass, with the air of a connoisseur. "Let me never hear any ill words against the fare of the Bastile," said he, half closing his eyes; "happy are the prisoners who can get only half a bottle of such Burgundy every day."

"All those at fifteen francs drink it," said Baisemeaux. "It is very old Volnay."

"Does that poor student, Seldon, drink such good wine?"

"Oh, no!"

"I thought I heard you say he was boarded at fifteen francs."

"He! no, indeed; a man who makes districts - distichs I mean - at fifteen francs! No, no! it is his neighbor who is at fifteen francs."

"Which neighbor?"

"The other, second Bertaudiere."

"Excuse me, my dear governor; but you speak a language which requires quite an apprenticeship to understand."

"Very true," said the governor. "Allow me to explain: second Bertaudiere is the person who occupies the second floor of the tower of the Bertaudiere."

"So that Bertaudiere is the name of one of the towers of the Bastile? The fact is, I think I recollect hearing that each tower has a name of its own. Whereabouts is the one you are speaking of?"

"Look," said Baisemeaux, going to the window. "It is that tower to the left - the second one."

"Is the prisoner at fifteen francs there?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Seven or eight years, nearly."

"What do you mean by nearly? Do you not know the dates more precisely?"

"It was not in my time, M. d'Herblay."

"But I should have thought that Louviere or Tremblay would have told you."

"The secrets of the Bastile are never handed over with the keys of the governorship."

"Indeed! Then the cause of his imprisonment is a mystery - a state secret."

"Oh, no! I do not suppose it is a state secret, but a secret - like everything that happens at the Bastile."

"But," said Aramis, "why do you speak more freely of Seldon than of second Bertaudiere?"

"Because, in my opinion, the crime of the man who writes a distich is not so great as that of the man who resembles - "

"Yes, yes; I understand you. Still, do not the turnkeys talk with your prisoners?"

"Of course."

"The prisoners, I suppose, tell them they are not guilty?"

"They are always telling them that; it is a matter of course; the same song over and over again."

"But does not the resemblance you were speaking about just now strike the turnkeys?"

"My dear M. d'Herblay, it is only for men attached to the court, as you are, to take trouble about such matters."

"You're right, you're right, my dear M. Baisemeaux. Let me give you another taste of this Volnay."

"Not a taste merely, a full glass; fill yours too."

"Nay, nay! You are a musketeer still, to the very tips of your fingers, while I have become a bishop. A taste for me; a glass for yourself."

"As you please." And Aramis and the governor nodded to each other, as they drank their wine. "But," said Aramis, looking with fixed attention at the ruby-colored wine he had raised to the level of his eyes, as if he wished to enjoy it with all his senses at the same moment, "but what you might call a resemblance, another would not, perhaps, take any notice of."

"Most certainly he would, though, if it were any one who knew the person he resembles."

"I really think, dear M. Baisemeaux, that it can be nothing more than a resemblance of your own creation."

"Upon my honor, it is not so."

"Stay," continued Aramis. "I have seen many persons very like the one we are speaking of; but, out of respect, no one ever said anything about it."

"Very likely; because there is resemblance and resemblance. This is a striking one, and, if you were to see him, you would admit it to be so."

"If I were to see him, indeed," said Aramis, in an indifferent tone; "but in all probability I never shall."

"Why not?"

"Because if I were even to put my foot inside one of those horrible dungeons, I should fancy I was buried there forever."

"No, no; the cells are very good places to live in."

"I really do not, and cannot believe it, and that is a fact."

"Pray do not speak ill of second Bertaudiere. It is really a good room, very nicely furnished and carpeted. The young fellow has by no means been unhappy there; the best lodging the Bastile affords has been his. There is a chance for you."

"Nay, nay," said Aramis, coldly; "you will never make me believe there are any good rooms in the Bastile; and, as for your carpets, they exist only in your imagination. I should find nothing but spiders, rats, and perhaps toads, too."

"Toads?" cried Baisemeaux.

"Yes, in the dungeons."

"Ah! I don't say there are not toads in the dungeons," replied Baisemeaux. "But - will you be convinced by your own eyes?" he continued, with a sudden impulse.

"No, certainly not."

"Not even to satisfy yourself of the resemblance which you deny, as you do the carpets?"

"Some spectral-looking person, a mere shadow; an unhappy, dying man."

"Nothing of the kind - as brisk and vigorous a young fellow as ever lived."

"Melancholy and ill-tempered, then?"

"Not at all; very gay and lively."

"Nonsense; you are joking."

"Will you follow me?" said Baisemeaux.

"What for?"

"To go the round of the Bastile."

"Why?"

"You will then see for yourself - see with your own eyes."

"But the regulations?"

"Never mind them. To-day my major has leave of absence; the lieutenant is visiting the post on the bastions; we are sole masters of the situation."

"No, no, my dear governor; why, the very idea of the sound of the bolts

makes me shudder. You will only have to forget me in second or fourth Bertaudiere, and then - "

"You are refusing an opportunity that may never present itself again. Do you know that, to obtain the favor I propose to you gratis, some of the princes of the blood have offered me as much as fifty thousand francs."

"Really! he must be worth seeing, then?"

"Forbidden fruit, my lord; forbidden fruit. You who belong to the church ought to know that."

"Well, if had any curiosity, it would be to see the poor author of the distich."

"Very well, we will see him, too; but if I were at all curious, it would be about the beautiful carpeted room and its lodger."

"Furniture is very commonplace; and a face with no expression in it offers little or no interest."

"But a boarder at fifteen francs is always interesting."

"By the by, I forgot to ask you about that. Why fifteen francs for him, and only three francs for poor Seldon?"

"The distinction made in that instance was a truly noble act, and one which displayed the king's goodness of heart to great advantage."

"The king's, you say."

"The cardinal's, I mean. 'This unhappy man,' said M. Mazarin, 'is destined to remain in prison forever.'"

"Why so?"

"Why, it seems that his crime is a lasting one; and, consequently, his punishment ought to be so, too."

"Lasting?"

"No doubt of it, unless he is fortunate enough to catch the small-pox, and even that is difficult, for we never get any impure air here."

"Nothing can be more ingenious than your train of reasoning, my dear M. Baisemeaux. Do you, however, mean to say that this unfortunate man must suffer without interruption or termination?"

"I did not say he was to suffer, my lord; a fifteen-franc boarder does not suffer."

"He suffers imprisonment, at all events."

"No doubt; there is no help for that, but this suffering is sweetened for him. You must admit that this young fellow was not born to eat all the good things he does eat; for instance, such things as we have on the table now; this pasty that has not been touched, these crawfish from the River Marne, of which we have hardly taken any, and which are almost as large as lobsters; all these things will at once be taken to second Bertaudiere, with a bottle of that Volnay which you think so excellent. After you have seen it you will believe it, I hope."

"Yes, my dear governor, certainly; but all this time you are thinking only of your very happy fifteen-franc prisoner, and you forget poor Seldon, my _protege_."

"Well, out of consideration for you, it shall be a gala day for him; he shall have some biscuits and preserves with this small bottle of port."

"You are a good-hearted fellow; I have said so already, and I repeat it, my dear Baisemeaux."

"Well, let us set off, then," said the governor, a little bewildered, partly from the wine he had drunk, and partly from Aramis's praises.

"Do not forget that I only go to oblige you," said the prelate.

"Very well; but you will thank me when you get there."

"Let us go, then."

"Wait until I have summoned the jailer," said Baisemeaux, as he struck the bell twice; at which summons a man appeared. "I am going to visit the towers," said the governor. "No guards, no drums, no noise at all."

"If I were not to leave my cloak here," said Aramis, pretending to be alarmed, "I should really think I was going to prison on my own account."

The jailer preceded the governor, Aramis walking on his right hand; some of the soldiers who happened to be in the courtyard drew themselves up in a line, as stiff as posts, as the governor passed along. Baisemeaux led the way down several steps which conducted to a sort of esplanade; thence they arrived at the drawbridge, where the sentinels on duty received the governor with the proper honors. The governor turned toward Aramis, and, speaking in such a tone that the sentinels could not lose a word, he observed, - "I hope you have a good memory, monsieur?"

"Why?" inquired Aramis.

"On account of your plans and your measurements, for you know that no one is allowed, not architects even, to enter where the prisoners are, with paper, pens or pencil."

"Good," said Aramis to himself, "it seems I am an architect, then. It sounds like one of D'Artagnan's jokes, who perceived in me the engineer of Belle-Isle." Then he added aloud: "Be easy on that score, monsieur; in our profession, a mere glance and a good memory are quite sufficient."

Baisemeaux did not change countenance, and the soldiers took Aramis for what he seemed to be. "Very well; we will first visit la Bertaudiere," said Baisemeaux, still intending the sentinels to hear him. Then, turning to the jailer, he added: "You will take the opportunity of carrying to No. 2 the few dainties I pointed out."

"Dear M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, "you are always forgetting No. 3."

"So I am," said the governor; and upon that, they began to ascend. The number of bolts, gratings, and locks for this single courtyard would have sufficed for the safety of an entire city. Aramis was neither an imaginative nor a sensitive man; he had been somewhat of a poet in his youth, but his heart was hard and indifferent, as the heart of every man of fifty-five years of age is, who has been frequently and passionately attached to women in his lifetime, or rather who has been passionately loved by them. But when he placed his foot upon the worn stone steps, along which so many unhappy wretches had passed, when he felt himself impregnated, as it were, with the atmosphere of those gloomy dungeons, moistened with tears, there could be but little doubt he was overcome by his feelings, for his head was bowed and his eyes became dim, as he followed Baisemeaux without a syllable.