

Chapter 58. Jesus Seigneur.

Whilst Mordaunt was making his way to Cromwell's tent, D'Artagnan and Porthos had brought their prisoners to the house which had been assigned to them as their dwelling at Newcastle.

The order given by Mordaunt to the sergeant had been heard by D'Artagnan, who accordingly, by an expressive glance, warned Athos and Aramis to exercise extreme caution. The prisoners, therefore, had remained silent as they marched along in company with their conquerors--which they could do with the less difficulty since each of them had occupation enough in answering his own thoughts.

It would be impossible to describe Mousqueton's astonishment when from the threshold of the door he saw the four friends approaching, followed by a sergeant with a dozen men. He rubbed his eyes, doubting if he really saw before him Athos and Aramis; and forced at last to yield to evidence, he was on the point of breaking forth in exclamations when he encountered a glance from the eyes of Porthos, the repressive force of which he was not inclined to dispute.

Mousqueton remained glued to the door, awaiting the explanation of this strange occurrence. What upset him completely was that the four friends seemed to have no acquaintance with one another.

The house to which D'Artagnan and Porthos conducted Athos and Aramis was the one assigned to them by General Cromwell and of which they had taken possession on the previous evening. It was at the corner of two streets and had in the rear, bordering on the side street, stables and a sort of garden. The windows on the ground floor, according to a custom in provincial villages, were barred, so that they strongly resembled the windows of a prison.

The two friends made the prisoners enter the house first, whilst they stood at the door, desiring Mousqueton to take the four horses to the stable.

"Why don't we go in with them?" asked Porthos.

"We must first see what the sergeant wishes us to do," replied D'Artagnan.

The sergeant and his men took possession of the little garden.

D'Artagnan asked them what they wished and why they had taken that position.

"We have had orders," answered the man, "to help you in taking care of your prisoners."

There could be no fault to find with this arrangement; on the contrary, it seemed to be a delicate attention, to be gratefully received; D'Artagnan, therefore, thanked the man and gave him a crown piece to

drink to General Cromwell's health.

The sergeant answered that Puritans never drank, and put the crown piece in his pocket.

"Ah!" said Porthos, "what a fearful day, my dear D'Artagnan!"

"What! a fearful day, when to-day we find our friends?"

"Yes; but under what circumstances?"

"'Tis true that our position is an awkward one; but let us go in and see more clearly what is to be done."

"Things look black enough," replied Porthos; "I understand now why Aramis advised me to strangle that horrible Mordaunt."

"Silence!" cried the Gascon; "do not utter that name."

"But," argued Porthos, "I speak French and they are all English."

D'Artagnan looked at Porthos with that air of wonder which a cunning man cannot help feeling at displays of crass stupidity.

But as Porthos on his side could not comprehend his astonishment, he merely pushed him indoors, saying, "Let us go in."

They found Athos in profound despondency; Aramis looked first at Porthos

and then at D'Artagnan, without speaking, but the latter understood his meaningful look.

"You want to know how we came here? 'Tis easily guessed. Mazarin sent us with a letter to General Cromwell."

"But how came you to fall into company with Mordaunt, whom I bade you distrust?" asked Athos.

"And whom I advised you to strangle, Porthos," said Aramis.

"Mazarin again. Cromwell had sent him to Mazarin. Mazarin sent us to Cromwell. There is a certain fatality in it."

"Yes, you are right, D'Artagnan, a fatality that will separate and ruin us! So, my dear Aramis, say no more about it and let us prepare to submit to destiny."

"Zounds! on the contrary, let us speak about it; for it was agreed among us, once for all, that we should always hold together, though engaged on opposing sides."

"Yes," added Athos, "I now ask you, D'Artagnan, what side you are on? Ah! behold for what end the wretched Mazarin has made use of you. Do you know in what crime you are to-day engaged? In the capture of a king, his degradation and his murder."

"Oh! oh!" cried Porthos, "do you think so?"

"You are exaggerating, Athos; we are not so far gone as that," replied the lieutenant.

"Good heavens! we are on the very eve of it. I say, why is the king taken prisoner? Those who wish to respect him as a master would not buy him as a slave. Do you think it is to replace him on the throne that Cromwell has paid for him two hundred thousand pounds sterling? They will kill him, you may be sure of it."

"I don't maintain the contrary," said D'Artagnan. "But what's that to us? I am here because I am a soldier and have to obey orders--I have taken an oath to obey, and I do obey; but you who have taken no such oath, why are you here and what cause do you represent?"

"That most sacred in the world," said Athos; "the cause of misfortune, of religion, royalty. A friend, a wife, a daughter, have done us the honor to call us to their aid. We have served them to the best of our poor means, and God will recompense the will, forgive the want of power. You may see matters differently, D'Artagnan, and think otherwise. I will not attempt to argue with you, but I blame you."

"Heyday!" cried D'Artagnan, "what matters it to me, after all, if Cromwell, who's an Englishman, revolts against his king, who is a Scotchman? I am myself a Frenchman. I have nothing to do with these things--why hold me responsible?"

"Yes," said Porthos.

"Because all gentlemen are brothers, because you are a gentleman, because the kings of all countries are the first among gentlemen, because the blind populace, ungrateful and brutal, always takes pleasure in pulling down what is above them. And you, you, D'Artagnan, a man sprung from the ancient nobility of France, bearing an honorable name, carrying a good sword, have helped to give up a king to beersellers, shopkeepers, and wagoners. Ah! D'Artagnan! perhaps you have done your duty as a soldier, but as a gentleman, I say that you are very culpable."

D'Artagnan was chewing the stalk of a flower, unable to reply and thoroughly uncomfortable; for when turned from the eyes of Athos he encountered those of Aramis.

"And you, Porthos," continued the count, as if in consideration for D'Artagnan's embarrassment, "you, the best heart, the best friend, the best soldier that I know--you, with a soul that makes you worthy of a birth on the steps of a throne, and who, sooner or later, must receive your reward from an intelligent king--you, my dear Porthos, you, a gentleman in manners, in tastes and in courage, you are as culpable as D'Artagnan."

Porthos blushed, but with pleasure rather than with confusion; and yet, bowing his head, as if humiliated, he said:

"Yes, yes, my dear count, I feel that you are right."

Athos arose.

"Come," he said, stretching out his hand to D'Artagnan, "come, don't be sullen, my dear son, for I have said all this to you, if not in the tone, at least with the feelings of a father. It would have been easier to me merely to have thanked you for preserving my life and not to have uttered a word of all this."

"Doubtless, doubtless, Athos. But here it is: you have sentiments, the devil knows what, such as every one can't entertain. Who could suppose that a sensible man could leave his house, France, his ward--a charming youth, for we saw him in the camp--to fly to the aid of a rotten, worm-eaten royalty, which is going to crumble one of these days like an old hovel. The sentiments you air are certainly fine, so fine that they are superhuman."

"However that may be, D'Artagnan," replied Athos, without falling into the snare which his Gascon friend had prepared for him by an appeal to his parental love, "however that may be, you know in the bottom of your heart that it is true; but I am wrong to dispute with my master. D'Artagnan, I am your prisoner--treat me as such."

"Ah! pardieu!" said D'Artagnan, "you know you will not be my prisoner very long."

"No," said Aramis, "they will doubtless treat us like the prisoners of the Philipghauts."

"And how were they treated?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Why," said Aramis, "one-half were hanged and the other half were shot."

"Well, I," said D'Artagnan "I answer that while there remains a drop of blood in my veins you will be neither hanged nor shot. Sang Diou! let them come on! Besides--do you see that door, Athos?"

"Yes; what then?"

"Well, you can go out by that door whenever you please; for from this moment you are free as the air."

"I recognize you there, my brave D'Artagnan," replied Athos; "but you are no longer our masters. That door is guarded, D'Artagnan; you know that."

"Very well, you will force it," said Porthos. "There are only a dozen men at the most."

"That would be nothing for us four; it is too much for us two. No, divided as we now are, we must perish. See the fatal example: on the Vendomois road, D'Artagnan, you so brave, and you, Porthos, so valiant and so strong--you were beaten; to-day Aramis and I are beaten in our turn. Now that never happened to us when we were four together. Let us die, then, as De Winter has died; as for me, I will fly only on condition that we all fly together."

"Impossible," said D'Artagnan; "we are under Mazarin's orders."

"I know it and I have nothing more to say; my arguments lead to nothing; doubtless they are bad, since they have not determined minds so just as yours."

"Besides," said Aramis, "had they taken effect it would be still better not to compromise two excellent friends like D'Artagnan and Porthos. Be assured, gentlemen, we shall do you honor in our dying. As for myself, I shall be proud to face the bullets, or even the rope, in company with you, Athos; for you have never seemed to me so grand as you are to-day."

D'Artagnan said nothing, but, after having gnawed the flower stalk, he began to bite his nails. At last:

"Do you imagine," he resumed, "that they mean to kill you? And wherefore should they do so? What interest have they in your death? Moreover, you are our prisoners."

"Fool!" cried Aramis; "knowest thou not, then, Mordaunt? I have but exchanged with him one look, yet that look convinced me that we were doomed."

"The truth is, I'm very sorry that I did not strangle him as you advised me," said Porthos.

"Eh! I make no account of the harm Mordaunt can do!" cried D'Artagnan.

"Cap de Diou! if he troubles me too much I will crush him, the insect!"

Do not fly, then. It is useless; for I swear to you that you are as safe here as you were twenty years ago--you, Athos, in the Rue Ferou, and you, Aramis, in the Rue de Vaugirard."

"Stop," cried Athos, extending his hand to one of the grated windows by which the room was lighted; "you will soon know what to expect, for here he is."

"Who?"

"Mordaunt."

In fact, looking at the place to which Athos pointed, D'Artagnan saw a cavalier coming toward the house at full gallop.

It was Mordaunt.

D'Artagnan rushed out of the room.

Porthos wanted to follow him.

"Stay," said D'Artagnan, "and do not come till you hear me drum my fingers on the door."

When Mordaunt arrived opposite the house he saw D'Artagnan on the threshold and the soldiers lying on the grass here and there, with their arms.

"Halloo!" he cried, "are the prisoners still there?"

"Yes, sir," answered the sergeant, uncovering.

"'Tis well; order four men to conduct them to my lodging."

Four men prepared to do so.

"What is it?" said D'Artagnan, with that jeering manner which our readers have so often observed in him since they made his acquaintance.

"What is the matter, if you please?"

"Sir," replied Mordaunt, "I have ordered the two prisoners we made this morning to be conducted to my lodging."

"Wherefore, sir? Excuse curiosity, but I wish to be enlightened on the subject."

"Because these prisoners, sir, are at my disposal and I choose to dispose of them as I like."

"Allow me--allow me, sir," said D'Artagnan, "to observe you are in error. The prisoners belong to those who take them and not to those who only saw them taken. You might have taken Lord Winter--who, 'tis said, was your uncle--prisoner, but you preferred killing him; 'tis well; we, that is, Monsieur du Vallon and I, could have killed our prisoners--we preferred taking them."

Mordaunt's very lips grew white with rage.

D'Artagnan now saw that affairs were growing worse and he beat the guard's march upon the door. At the first beat Porthos rushed out and stood on the other side of the door.

This movement was observed by Mordaunt.

"Sir!" he thus addressed D'Artagnan, "your resistance is useless; these prisoners have just been given me by my illustrious patron, Oliver Cromwell."

These words struck D'Artagnan like a thunderbolt. The blood mounted to his temples, his eyes became dim; he saw from what fountainhead the ferocious hopes of the young man arose, and he put his hand to the hilt of his sword.

As for Porthos, he looked inquiringly at D'Artagnan.

This look of Porthos's made the Gascon regret that he had summoned the brute force of his friend to aid him in an affair which seemed to require chiefly cunning.

"Violence," he said to himself, "would spoil all; D'Artagnan, my friend, prove to this young serpent that thou art not only stronger, but more subtle than he is."

"Ah!" he said, making a low bow, "why did you not begin by saying that,

Monsieur Mordaunt? What! are you sent by General Oliver Cromwell, the most illustrious captain of the age?"

"I have this instant left him," replied Mordaunt, alighting, in order to give his horse to a soldier to hold.

"Why did you not say so at once, my dear sir! all England is with Cromwell; and since you ask for my prisoners, I bend, sir, to your wishes. They are yours; take them."

Mordaunt, delighted, advanced, Porthos looking at D'Artagnan with open-mouthed astonishment. Then D'Artagnan trod on his foot and Porthos began to understand that this was merely acting.

Mordaunt put his foot on the first step of the door and, with his hat in hand, prepared to pass by the two friends, motioning to the four men to follow him.

"But, pardon," said D'Artagnan, with the most charming smile and putting his hand on the young man's shoulder, "if the illustrious General Oliver Cromwell has disposed of our prisoners in your favour, he has, of course, made that act of donation in writing."

Mordaunt stopped short.

"He has given you some little writing for me--the least bit of paper which may show that you come in his name. Be pleased to give me that scrap of paper so that I may justify, by a pretext at least, my

abandoning my countrymen. Otherwise, you see, although I am sure that General Oliver Cromwell can intend them no harm, it would have a bad appearance."

Mordaunt recoiled; he felt the blow and discharged a terrible look at D'Artagnan, who responded by the most amiable expression that ever graced a human countenance.

"When I tell you a thing, sir," said Mordaunt, "you insult me by doubting it."

"H!" cried D'Artagnan, "I doubt what you say! God keep me from it, my dear Monsieur Mordaunt! On the contrary, I take you to be a worthy and accomplished gentleman. And then, sir, do you wish me to speak freely to you?" continued D'Artagnan, with his frank expression.

"Speak out, sir," said Mordaunt.

"Monsieur du Vallon, yonder, is rich and has forty thousand francs yearly, so he does not care about money. I do not speak for him, but for myself."

"Well, sir? What more?"

"Well--I--I'm not rich. In Gascony 'tis no dishonor, sir, nobody is rich; and Henry IV., of glorious memory, who was the king of the Gascons, as His Majesty Philip IV. is the king of the Spaniards, never had a penny in his pocket."

"Go on, sir, I see what you wish to get at; and if it is simply what I think that stops you, I can obviate the difficulty."

"Ah, I knew well," said the Gascon, "that you were a man of talent. Well, here's the case, here's where the saddle hurts me, as we French say. I am an officer of fortune, nothing else; I have nothing but what my sword brings me in--that is to say, more blows than banknotes. Now, on taking prisoners, this morning, two Frenchmen, who seemed to me of high birth--in short, two knights of the Garter--I said to myself, my fortune is made. I say two, because in such circumstances, Monsieur du Vallon, who is rich, always gives me his prisoners."

Mordaunt, completely deceived by the wordy civility of D'Artagnan, smiled like a man who understands perfectly the reasons given him, and said:

"I shall have the order signed directly, sir, and with it two thousand pistoles; meanwhile, let me take these men away."

"No," replied D'Artagnan; "what signifies a delay of half an hour? I am a man of order, sir; let us do things in order."

"Nevertheless," replied Mordaunt, "I could compel you; I command here."

"Ah, sir!" said D'Artagnan, "I see that although we have had the honor of traveling in your company you do not know us. We are gentlemen; we are, both of us, able to kill you and your eight men--we two only. For

Heaven's sake don't be obstinate, for when others are obstinate I am obstinate likewise, and then I become ferocious and headstrong, and there's my friend, who is even more headstrong and ferocious than myself. Besides, we are sent here by Cardinal Mazarin, and at this moment represent both the king and the cardinal, and are, therefore, as ambassadors, able to act with impunity, a thing that General Oliver Cromwell, who is assuredly as great a politician as he is a general, is quite the man to understand. Ask him then, for the written order. What will that cost you my dear Monsieur Mordaunt?"

"Yes, the written order," said Porthos, who now began to comprehend what D'Artagnan was aiming at, "we ask only for that."

However inclined Mordaunt was to have recourse to violence, he understood the reasons D'Artagnan had given him; besides, completely ignorant of the friendship which existed between the four Frenchmen, all his uneasiness disappeared when he heard of the plausible motive of the ransom. He decided, therefore, not only to fetch the order, but the two thousand pistoles, at which he estimated the prisoners. He therefore mounted his horse and disappeared.

"Good!" thought D'Artagnan; "a quarter of an hour to go to the tent, a quarter of an hour to return; it is more than we need." Then turning, without the least change of countenance, to Porthos, he said, looking him full in the face: "Friend Porthos, listen to this; first, not a syllable to either of our friends of what you have heard; it is unnecessary for them to know the service we are going to render them."

"Very well; I understand."

"Go to the stable; you will find Mousqueton there; saddle your horses, put your pistols in your saddle-bags, take out the horses and lead them to the street below this, so that there will be nothing to do but mount them; all the rest is my business."

Porthos made no remark, but obeyed, with the sublime confidence he had in his friend.

"I go," he said, "only, shall I enter the chamber where those gentlemen are?"

"No, it is not worth while."

"Well, do me the kindness to take my purse, which I left on the mantelpiece."

"All right."

He then proceeded, with his usual calm gait, to the stable and went into the very midst of the soldiery, who, foreigner as he was, could not help admiring his height and the enormous strength of his great limbs.

At the corner of the street he met Mousqueton and took him with him.

D'Artagnan, meantime, went into the house, whistling a tune which he had begun before Porthos went away.

"My dear Athos, I have reflected on your arguments and I am convinced. I am sorry to have had anything to do with this matter. As you say, Mazarin is a knave. I have resolved to fly with you, not a word--be ready. Your swords are in the corner; do not forget them, they are in many circumstances very useful; there is Porthos's purse, too."

He put it into his pocket. The two friends were perfectly stupefied.

"Well, pray, is there anything to be so surprised at?" he said. "I was blind; Athos has made me see, that's all; come here."

The two friends went near him.

"Do you see that street? There are the horses. Go out by the door, turn to the right, jump into your saddles, all will be right; don't be uneasy at anything except mistaking the signal. That will be the signal when I call out--Jesus Seigneur!"

"But give us your word that you will come too, D'Artagnan," said Athos.

"I swear I will, by Heaven."

"'Tis settled," said Aramis; "at the cry 'Jesus Seigneur' we go out, upset all that stands in our way, run to our horses, jump into our saddles, spur them; is that all?"

"Exactly."

"See, Aramis, as I have told you, D'Artagnan is first amongst us all," said Athos.

"Very true," replied the Gascon, "but I always run away from compliments. Don't forget the signal: 'Jesus Seigneur!'" and he went out as he came in, whistling the self-same air.

The soldiers were playing or sleeping; two of them were singing in a corner, out of tune, the psalm: "On the rivers of Babylon."

D'Artagnan called the sergeant. "My dear friend, General Cromwell has sent Monsieur Mordaunt to fetch me. Guard the prisoners well, I beg of you."

The sergeant made a sign, as much as to say he did not understand French, and D'Artagnan tried to make him comprehend by signs and gestures. Then he went into the stable; he found the five horses saddled, his own amongst the rest.

"Each of you take a horse by the bridle," he said to Porthos and Mousqueton; "turn to the left, so that Athos and Aramis may see you clearly from the window."

"They are coming, then?" said Porthos.

"In a moment."

"You didn't forget my purse?"

"No; be easy."

"Good."

Porthos and Mousqueton each took a horse by the bridle and proceeded to their post.

Then D'Artagnan, being alone, struck a light and lighted a small bit of tinder, mounted his horse and stopped at the door in the midst of the soldiers. There, caressing as he pretended, the animal with his hand, he put this bit of burning tinder in his ear. It was necessary to be as good a horseman as he was to risk such a scheme, for no sooner had the animal felt the burning tinder than he uttered a cry of pain and reared and jumped as if he had been mad.

The soldiers, whom he was nearly trampling, ran away.

"Help! help!" cried D'Artagnan; "stop--my horse has the staggers."

In an instant the horse's eyes grew bloodshot and he was white with foam.

"Help!" cried D'Artagnan. "What! will you let me be killed? Jesus Seigneur!"

No sooner had he uttered this cry than the door opened and Athos and

Aramis rushed out. The coast, owing to the Gascon's stratagem, was clear.

"The prisoners are escaping! the prisoners are escaping!" cried the sergeant.

"Stop! stop!" cried D'Artagnan, giving rein to his famous steed, who, darting forth, overturned several men.

"Stop! stop!" cried the soldiers, and ran for their arms.

But the prisoners were in their saddles and lost no time hastening to the nearest gate.

In the middle of the street they saw Grimaud and Blaisois, who were coming to find their masters. With one wave of his hand Athos made Grimaud, who followed the little troop, understand everything, and they passed on like a whirlwind, D'Artagnan still directing them from behind with his voice.

They passed through the gate like apparitions, without the guards thinking of detaining them, and reached the open country.

All this time the soldiers were calling out, "Stop! stop!" and the sergeant, who began to see that he was the victim of an artifice, was almost in a frenzy of despair. Whilst all this was going on, a cavalier in full gallop was seen approaching. It was Mordaunt with the order in his hand.

"The prisoners!" he exclaimed, jumping off his horse.

The sergeant had not the courage to reply; he showed him the open door, the empty room. Mordaunt darted to the steps, understood all, uttered a cry, as if his very heart was pierced, and fell fainting on the stone steps.