

Chapter 60. Respect to Fallen Majesty.

As our fugitives approached the house, they found the ground cut up, as if a considerable body of horsemen had preceded them. Before the door the traces were yet more apparent; these horsemen, whoever they might be, had halted there.

"Egad!" cried D'Artagnan, "it's quite clear that the king and his escort have been by here."

"The devil!" said Porthos; "in that case they have eaten everything."

"Bah!" said D'Artagnan, "they will have left a chicken, at least." He dismounted and knocked on the door. There was no response.

He pushed open the door and found the first room empty and deserted.

"Well?" cried Porthos.

"I can see nobody," said D'Artagnan. "Aha!"

"What?"

"Blood!"

At this word the three friends leaped from their horses and entered.

D'Artagnan had already opened the door of the second room, and from the expression of his face it was clear that he there beheld some extraordinary object.

The three friends drew near and discovered a young man stretched on the ground, bathed in a pool of blood. It was evident that he had attempted to regain his bed, but had not had sufficient strength to do so.

Athos, who imagined that he saw him move, was the first to go up to him.

"Well?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Well, if he is dead," said Athos, "he has not been so long, for he is still warm. But no, his heart is beating. Ho, there, my friend!"

The wounded man heaved a sigh. D'Artagnan took some water in the hollow of his hand and threw it upon his face. The man opened his eyes, made an effort to raise his head, and fell back again. The wound was in the top of his skull and blood was flowing copiously.

Aramis dipped a cloth into some water and applied it to the gash. Again the wounded man opened his eyes and looked in astonishment at these strangers, who appeared to pity him.

"You are among friends," said Athos, in English; "so cheer up, and tell us, if you have the strength to do so, what has happened?"

"The king," muttered the wounded man, "the king is a prisoner."

"You have seen him?" asked Aramis, in the same language.

The man made no reply.

"Make your mind easy," resumed Athos, "we are all faithful servants of his majesty."

"Is what you tell me true?" asked the wounded man.

"On our honor as gentlemen."

"Then I may tell you all. I am brother to Parry, his majesty's lackey."

Athos and Aramis remembered that this was the name by which De Winter had called the man they had found in the passage of the king's tent.

"We know him," said Athos, "he never left the king."

"Yes, that is he. Well, he thought of me, when he saw the king was taken, and as they were passing before the house he begged in the king's name that they would stop, as the king was hungry. They brought him into this room and placed sentinels at the doors and windows. Parry knew this room, as he had often been to see me when the king was at Newcastle. He knew that there was a trap-door communicating with a cellar, from which one could get into the orchard. He made a sign, which I understood, but the king's guards must have noticed it and held themselves on guard. I

went out as if to fetch wood, passed through the subterranean passage into the cellar, and whilst Parry was gently bolting the door, pushed up the board and beckoned to the king to follow me. Alas! he would not. But Parry clasped his hands and implored him, and at last he agreed. I went on first, fortunately. The king was a few steps behind me, when suddenly I saw something rise up in front of me like a huge shadow. I wanted to cry out to warn the king, but that very moment I felt a blow as if the house was falling on my head, and fell insensible. When I came to myself again, I was stretched in the same place. I dragged myself as far as the yard. The king and his escort were no longer there. I spent perhaps an hour in coming from the yard to this place; then my strength gave out and I fainted again."

"And now how are you feeling?"

"Very ill," replied the wounded man.

"Can we do anything for you?" asked Athos.

"Help to put me on the bed; I think I shall feel better there."

"Have you any one to depend on for assistance?"

"My wife is at Durham and may return at any moment. But you--is there nothing that you want?"

"We came here with the intention of asking for something to eat."

"Alas, they have taken everything; there isn't a morsel of bread in the house."

"You hear, D'Artagnan?" said Athos; "we shall have to look elsewhere for our dinner."

"It is all one to me now," said D'Artagnan; "I am no longer hungry."

"Faith! neither am I," said Porthos.

They carried the man to his bed and called Grimaud to dress the wound. In the service of the four friends Grimaud had had so frequent occasion to make lint and bandages that he had become something of a surgeon.

In the meantime the fugitives had returned to the first room, where they took counsel together.

"Now," said Aramis, "we know how the matter stands. The king and his escort have gone this way; we had better take the opposite direction, eh?"

Athos did not reply; he reflected.

"Yes," said Porthos, "let us take the opposite direction; if we follow the escort we shall find everything devoured and die of hunger. What a confounded country this England is! This is the first time I have gone without my dinner for ten years, and it is generally my best meal."

"What do you think, D'Artagnan?" asked Athos. "Do you agree with Aramis?"

"Not at all," said D'Artagnan; "I am precisely of the contrary opinion."

"What! you would follow the escort?" exclaimed Porthos, in dismay.

"No, I would join the escort."

Athos's eyes shone with joy.

"Join the escort!" cried Aramis.

"Let D'Artagnan speak," said Athos; "you know he always has wise advice to give."

"Clearly," said D'Artagnan, "we must go where they will not look for us. Now, they will be far from looking for us among the Puritans; therefore, with the Puritans we must go."

"Good, my friend, good!" said Athos. "It is excellent advice. I was about to give it when you anticipated me."

"That, then, is your opinion?" asked Aramis.

"Yes. They will think we are trying to leave England and will search for us at the ports; meanwhile we shall reach London with the king. Once in London we shall be hard to find--without considering," continued Athos,

throwing a glance at Aramis, "the chances that may come to us on the way."

"Yes," said Aramis, "I understand."

"I, however, do not understand," said Porthos. "But no matter; since it is at the same time the opinion of D'Artagnan and of Athos, it must be the best."

"But," said Aramis, "shall we not be suspected by Colonel Harrison?"

"Egad!" cried D'Artagnan, "he's just the man I count upon. Colonel Harrison is one of our friends. We have met him twice at General Cromwell's. He knows that we were sent from France by Monsieur Mazarin; he will consider us as brothers. Besides, is he not a butcher's son? Well, then, Porthos shall show him how to knock down an ox with a blow of the fist, and I how to trip up a bull by taking him by the horns. That will insure his confidence."

Athos smiled. "You are the best companion that I know, D'Artagnan," he said, offering his hand to the Gascon; "and I am very happy in having found you again, my dear son."

This was, as we have seen, the term which Athos applied to D'Artagnan in his more expansive moods.

At this moment Grimaud came in. He had stanchd the wound and the man was better.

The four friends took leave of him and asked if they could deliver any message for him to his brother.

"Tell him," answered the brave man, "to let the king know that they have not killed me outright. However insignificant I am, I am sure that his majesty is concerned for me and blames himself for my death."

"Be easy," said D'Artagnan, "he will know all before night."

The little troop recommenced their march, and at the end of two hours perceived a considerable body of horsemen about half a league ahead.

"My dear friends," said D'Artagnan, "give your swords to Monsieur Mouston, who will return them to you at the proper time and place, and do not forget you are our prisoners."

It was not long before they joined the escort. The king was riding in front, surrounded by troopers, and when he saw Athos and Aramis a glow of pleasure lighted his pale cheeks.

D'Artagnan passed to the head of the column, and leaving his friends under the guard of Porthos, went straight to Harrison, who recognized him as having met him at Cromwell's and received him as politely as a man of his breeding and disposition could. It turned out as D'Artagnan had foreseen. The colonel neither had nor could have any suspicion.

They halted for the king to dine. This time, however, due precautions



were taken to prevent any attempt at escape. In the large room of the hotel a small table was placed for him and a large one for the officers.

"Will you dine with me?" asked Harrison of D'Artagnan.

"Gad, I should be very happy, but I have my companion, Monsieur du Vallon, and the two prisoners, whom I cannot leave. Let us manage it better. Have a table set for us in a corner and send us whatever you like from yours."

"Good," answered Harrison.

The matter was arranged as D'Artagnan had suggested, and when he returned he found the king already seated at his little table, where Parry waited on him, Harrison and his officers sitting together at another table, and, in a corner, places reserved for himself and his companions.

The table at which the Puritan officers were seated was round, and whether by chance or coarse intention, Harrison sat with his back to the king.

The king saw the four gentlemen come in, but appeared to take no notice of them.

They sat down in such a manner as to turn their backs on nobody. The officers, table and that of the king were opposite to them.

"I faith, colonel," said D'Artagnan, "we are very grateful for your gracious invitation; for without you we ran the risk of going without dinner, as we have without breakfast. My friend here, Monsieur du Vallon, shares my gratitude, for he was particularly hungry."

"And I am so still," said Porthos bowing to Harrison.

"And how," said Harrison, laughing, "did this serious calamity of going without breakfast happen to you?"

"In a very simple manner, colonel," said D'Artagnan. "I was in a hurry to join you and took the road you had already gone by. You can understand our disappointment when, arriving at a pretty little house on the skirts of a wood, which at a distance had quite a gay appearance, with its red roof and green shutters, we found nothing but a poor wretch bathed--Ah! colonel, pay my respects to the officer of yours who struck that blow."

"Yes," said Harrison, laughing, and looking over at one of the officers seated at his table. "When Groslow undertakes this kind of thing there's no need to go over the ground a second time."

"Ah! it was this gentleman?" said D'Artagnan, bowing to the officer.

"I am sorry he does not speak French, that I might tender him my compliments."

"I am ready to receive and return them, sir," said the officer, in pretty good French, "for I resided three years in Paris."

"Then, sir, allow me to assure you that your blow was so well directed that you have nearly killed your man."

"Nearly? I thought I had quite," said Groslow.

"No. It was a very near thing, but he is not dead."

As he said this, D'Artagnan gave a glance at Parry, who was standing in front of the king, to show him that the news was meant for him.

The king, too, who had listened in the greatest agony, now breathed again.

"Hang it," said Groslow, "I thought I had succeeded better. If it were not so far from here to the house I would return and finish him."

"And you would do well, if you are afraid of his recovering; for you know, if a wound in the head does not kill at once, it is cured in a week."

And D'Artagnan threw a second glance toward Parry, on whose face such an expression of joy was manifested that Charles stretched out his hand to him, smiling.

Parry bent over his master's hand and kissed it respectfully.

"I've a great desire to drink the king's health," said Athos.

"Let me propose it, then," said D'Artagnan.

"Do," said Aramis.

Porthos looked at D'Artagnan, quite amazed at the resources with which his companion's Gascon sharpness continually supplied him. D'Artagnan took up his camp tin cup, filled it with wine and arose.

"Gentlemen," said he, "let us drink to him who presides at the repast. Here's to our colonel, and let him know that we are always at his commands as far as London and farther."

And as D'Artagnan, as he spoke, looked at Harrison, the colonel imagined the toast was for himself. He arose and bowed to the four friends, whose eyes were fixed on Charles, while Harrison emptied his glass without the slightest misgiving.

The king, in return, looked at the four gentlemen and drank with a smile full of nobility and gratitude.

"Come, gentlemen," cried Harrison, regardless of his illustrious captive, "let us be off."

"Where do we sleep, colonel?"

"At Thirsk," replied Harrison.

"Parry," said the king, rising too, "my horse; I desire to go to Thirsk."

"Egad!" said D'Artagnan to Athos, "your king has thoroughly taken me, and I am quite at his service."

"If what you say is sincere," replied Athos, "he will never reach London."

"How so?"

"Because before then we shall have carried him off."

"Well, this time, Athos," said D'Artagnan, "upon my word, you are mad."

"Have you some plan in your head then?" asked Aramis.

"Ay!" said Porthos, "the thing would not be impossible with a good plan."

"I have none," said Athos; "but D'Artagnan will discover one."

D'Artagnan shrugged his shoulders and they proceeded.