

Chapter 61. D'Artagnan hits on a Plan.

As night closed in they arrived at Thirsk. The four friends appeared to be entire strangers to one another and indifferent to the precautions taken for guarding the king. They withdrew to a private house, and as they had reason every moment to fear for their safety, they occupied but one room and provided an exit, which might be useful in case of an attack. The lackeys were sent to their several posts, except that Grimaud lay on a truss of straw across the doorway.

D'Artagnan was thoughtful and seemed for the moment to have lost his usual loquacity. Porthos, who could never see anything that was not self-evident, talked to him as usual. He replied in monosyllables and Athos and Aramis looked significantly at one another.

Next morning D'Artagnan was the first to rise. He had been down to the stables, already taken a look at the horses and given the necessary orders for the day, whilst Athos and Aramis were still in bed and Porthos snoring.

At eight o'clock the march was resumed in the same order as the night before, except that D'Artagnan left his friends and began to renew the acquaintance which he had already struck up with Monsieur Groslow.

Groslow, whom D'Artagnan's praises had greatly pleased, welcomed him

with a gracious smile.

"Really, sir," D'Artagnan said to him, "I am pleased to find one with whom to talk in my own poor tongue. My friend, Monsieur du Vallon, is of a very melancholy disposition, so much so, that one can scarcely get three words out of him all day. As for our two prisoners, you can imagine that they are but little in the vein for conversation."

"They are hot royalists," said Groslow.

"The more reason they should be sulky with us for having captured the Stuart, for whom, I hope, you're preparing a pretty trial."

"Why," said Groslow, "that is just what we are taking him to London for."

"And you never by any chance lose sight of him, I presume?"

"I should think not, indeed. You see he has a truly royal escort."

"Ay, there's no fear in the daytime; but at night?"

"We redouble our precautions."

"And what method of surveillance do you employ?"

"Eight men remain constantly in his room."

"The deuce, he is well guarded, then. But besides these eight men, you doubtless place some guard outside?"

"Oh, no! Just think. What would you have two men without arms do against eight armed men?"

"Two men--how do you mean?"

"Yes, the king and his lackey."

"Oh! then they allow the lackey to remain with him?"

"Yes; Stuart begged this favor and Harrison consented. Under pretense that he's a king it appears he cannot dress or undress without assistance."

"Really, captain," said D'Artagnan, determined to continue on the laudatory tack on which he had commenced, "the more I listen to you the more surprised I am at the easy and elegant manner in which you speak French. You have lived three years in Paris? May I ask what you were doing there?"

"My father, who is a merchant, placed me with his correspondent, who in turn sent his son to join our house in London."

"Were you pleased with Paris, sir?"

"Yes, but you are much in want of a revolution like our own--not against

your king, who is a mere child, but against that lazar of an Italian, the queen's favorite."

"Ah! I am quite of your opinion, sir, and we should soon make an end of Mazarin if we had only a dozen officers like yourself, without prejudices, vigilant and incorruptible."

"But," said the officer, "I thought you were in his service and that it was he who sent you to General Cromwell."

"That is to say I am in the king's service, and that knowing he wanted to send some one to England, I solicited the appointment, so great was my desire to know the man of genius who now governs the three kingdoms. So that when he proposed to us to draw our swords in honor of old England you see how we snapped up the proposition."

"Yes, I know that you charged by the side of Mordaunt."

"On his right and left, sir. Ah! there's another brave and excellent young man."

"Do you know him?" asked the officer.

"Yes, very well. Monsieur du Vallon and myself came from France with him."

"It appears, too, you kept him waiting a long time at Boulogne."

"What would you have? I was like you, and had a king in keeping."

"Aha!" said Groslow; "what king?"

"Our own, to be sure, the little one--Louis XIV."

"And how long had you to take care of him?"

"Three nights; and, by my troth, I shall always remember those three nights with a certain pleasure."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that my friends, officers in the guards and mousquetaires, came to keep me company and we passed the night in feasting, drinking, dicing."

"Ah true," said the Englishman, with a sigh; "you Frenchmen are born boon companions."

"And don't you play, too, when you are on guard?"

"Never," said the Englishman.

"In that case you must be horribly bored, and have my sympathy."

"The fact is, I look to my turn for keeping guard with horror. It's tiresome work to keep awake a whole night."

"Yes, but with a jovial partner and dice, and guineas clinking on the cloth, the night passes like a dream. You don't like playing, then?"

"On the contrary, I do."

"Lansquenet, for instance?"

"Devoted to it. I used to play almost every night in France."

"And since your return to England?"

"I have not handled a card or dice-box."

"I sincerely pity you," said D'Artagnan, with an air of profound compassion.

"Look here," said the Englishman.

"Well?"

"To-morrow I am on guard."

"In Stuart's room?"

"Yes; come and pass the night with me."

"Impossible!"

"Impossible! why so?"

"I play with Monsieur du Vallon every night. Sometimes we don't go to bed at all!"

"Well, what of that?"

"Why, he would be annoyed if I did not play with him."

"Does he play well?"

"I have seen him lose as much as two thousand pistoles, laughing all the while till the tears rolled down."

"Bring him with you, then."

"But how about our prisoners?"

"Let your servants guard them."

"Yes, and give them a chance of escaping," said D'Artagnan. "Why, one of them is a rich lord from Touraine and the other a knight of Malta, of noble family. We have arranged the ransom of each of them--2,000 on arriving in France. We are reluctant to leave for a single moment men whom our lackeys know to be millionaires. It is true we plundered them a little when we took them, and I will even confess that it is their purse that Monsieur du Vallon and I draw on in our nightly play. Still, they

may have concealed some precious stone, some valuable diamond; so that we are like those misers who are unable to absent themselves from their treasures. We have made ourselves the constant guardians of our men, and while I sleep Monsieur du Vallon watches."

"Ah! ah!" said Groslow.

"You see, then, why I must decline your polite invitation, which is especially attractive to me, because nothing is so wearisome as to play night after night with the same person; the chances always balance and at the month's end nothing is gained or lost."

"Ah!" said Groslow, sighing; "there is something still more wearisome, and that is not to play at all."

"I can understand that," said D'Artagnan.

"But, come," resumed the Englishman, "are these men of yours dangerous?"

"In what respect?"

"Are they capable of attempting violence?"

D'Artagnan burst out laughing at the idea.

"Jesus Dieu!" he cried; "one of them is trembling with fever, having failed to adapt himself to this charming country of yours, and the other is a knight of Malta, as timid as a young girl; and for greater security

we have taken from them even their penknives and pocket scissors."

"Well, then," said Groslow, "bring them with you."

"But really----" said D'Artagnan.

"I have eight men on guard, you know. Four of them can guard the king and the other four your prisoners. I'll manage it somehow, you will see."

"But," said D'Artagnan, "now I think of it--what is to prevent our beginning to-night?"

"Nothing at all," said Groslow.

"Just so. Come to us this evening and to-morrow we'll return your visit."

"Capital! This evening with you, to-morrow at Stuart's, the next day with me."

"You see, that with a little forethought one can lead a merry life anywhere and everywhere," said D'Artagnan.

"Yes, with Frenchmen, and Frenchmen like you."

"And Monsieur du Vallon," added the other. "You will see what a fellow he is; a man who nearly killed Mazarin between two doors. They employ

him because they are afraid of him. Ah, there he is calling me now.
You'll excuse me, I know."

They exchanged bows and D'Artagnan returned to his companions.

"What on earth can you have been saying to that bulldog?" exclaimed Porthos.

"My dear fellow, don't speak like that of Monsieur Groslow. He's one of my most intimate friends."

"One of your friends!" cried Porthos, "this butcher of unarmed farmers!"

"Hush! my dear Porthos. Monsieur Groslow is perhaps rather hasty, it's true, but at bottom I have discovered two good qualities in him--he is conceited and stupid."

Porthos opened his eyes in amazement; Athos and Aramis looked at one another and smiled; they knew D'Artagnan, and knew that he did nothing without a purpose.

"But," continued D'Artagnan, "you shall judge of him for yourself. He is coming to play with us this evening."

"Oho!" said Porthos, his eyes glistening at the news. "Is he rich?"

"He's the son of one of the wealthiest merchants in London."

"And knows lansquenet?"

"Adores it."

"Basset?"

"His mania."

"Biribi?"

"Revels in it."

"Good," said Porthos; "we shall pass an agreeable evening."

"The more so, as it will be the prelude to a better."

"How so?"

"We invite him to play to-night; he has invited us in return to-morrow. But wait. To-night we stop at Derby; and if there is a bottle of wine in the town let Mousqueton buy it. It will be well to prepare a light supper, of which you, Athos and Aramis, are not to partake--Athos, because I told him you had a fever; Aramis, because you are a knight of Malta and won't mix with fellows like us. Do you understand?"

"That's no doubt very fine," said Porthos; "but deuce take me if I understand at all."

"Porthos, my friend, you know I am descended on the father's side from the Prophets and on the mother's from the Sybils, and that I only speak in parables and riddles. Let those who have ears hear and those who have eyes see; I can tell you nothing more at present."

"Go ahead, my friend," said Athos; "I am sure that whatever you do is well done."

"And you, Aramis, are you of that opinion?"

"Entirely so, my dear D'Artagnan."

"Very good," said D'Artagnan; "here indeed are true believers; it is a pleasure to work miracles before them; they are not like that unbelieving Porthos, who must see and touch before he will believe."

"The fact is," said Porthos, with an air of finesse, "I am rather incredulous."

D'Artagnan gave him playful buffet on the shoulder, and as they had reached the station where they were to breakfast, the conversation ended there.

At five in the evening they sent Mousqueton on before as agreed upon. Blaisois went with him.

In crossing the principal street in Derby the four friends perceived Blaisois standing in the doorway of a handsome house. It was there a

lodging was prepared for them.

At the hour agreed upon Groslow came. D'Artagnan received him as he would have done a friend of twenty years' standing. Porthos scanned him from head to foot and smiled when he discovered that in spite of the blow he had administered to Parry's brother, he was not nearly so strong as himself. Athos and Aramis suppressed as well as they could the disgust they felt in the presence of such coarseness and brutality.

In short, Groslow seemed to be pleased with his reception.

Athos and Aramis kept themselves to their role. At midnight they withdrew to their chamber, the door of which was left open on the pretext of kindly consideration. Furthermore, D'Artagnan went with them, leaving Porthos at play with Groslow.

Porthos gained fifty pistoles from Groslow, and found him a more agreeable companion than he had at first believed him to be.

As to Groslow, he promised himself that on the following evening he would recover from D'Artagnan what he had lost to Porthos, and on leaving reminded the Gascon of his appointment.

The next day was spent as usual. D'Artagnan went from Captain Groslow to Colonel Harrison and from Colonel Harrison to his friends. To any one not acquainted with him he seemed to be in his normal condition; but to his friends--to Athos and Aramis--was apparent a certain feverishness in his gayety.

"What is he contriving?" asked Aramis.

"Wait," said Athos.

Porthos said nothing, but he handled in his pocket the fifty pistoles he had gained from Groslow with a degree of satisfaction which betrayed itself in his whole bearing.

Arrived at Ryston, D'Artagnan assembled his friends. His face had lost the expression of careless gayety it had worn like a mask the whole day. Athos pinched Aramis's hand.

"The moment is at hand," he said.

"Yes," returned D'Artagnan, who had overheard him, "to-night, gentlemen, we rescue the king."

"D'Artagnan," said Athos, "this is no joke, I trust? It would quite cut me up."

"You are a very odd man, Athos," he replied, "to doubt me thus. Where and when have you seen me trifle with a friend's heart and a king's life? I have told you, and I repeat it, that to-night we rescue Charles I. You left it to me to discover the means and I have done so."

Porthos looked at D'Artagnan with an expression of profound admiration. Aramis smiled as one who hopes. Athos was pale, and trembled in every

limb.

"Speak," said Athos.

"We are invited," replied D'Artagnan, "to pass the night with M. Groslow. But do you know where?"

"No."

"In the king's room."

"The king's room?" cried Athos.

"Yes, gentlemen, in the king's room. Groslow is on guard there this evening, and to pass the time away he has invited us to keep him company."

"All four of us?" asked Athos.

"Pardieu! certainly, all four; we couldn't leave our prisoners, could we?"

"Ah! ah!" said Aramis.

"Tell us about it," said Athos, palpitating.

"We are going, then, we two with our swords, you with daggers. We four have got to master these eight fools and their stupid captain. Monsieur

Porthos, what do you say to that?"

"I say it is easy enough," answered Porthos.

"We dress the king in Groslow's clothes. Mousqueton, Grimaud and Blaisois have our horses saddled at the end of the first street. We mount them and before daylight are twenty leagues distant."

Athos placed his two hands on D'Artagnan's shoulders, and gazed at him with his calm, sad smile.

"I declare, my friend," said he, "that there is not a creature under the sky who equals you in prowess and in courage. Whilst we thought you indifferent to our sorrows, which you couldn't share without crime, you alone among us have discovered what we were searching for in vain. I repeat it, D'Artagnan, you are the best one among us; I bless and love you, my dear son."

"And to think that I couldn't find that out," said Porthos, scratching his head; "it is so simple."

"But," said Aramis, "if I understand rightly we are to kill them all, eh?"

Athos shuddered and turned pale.

"Mordioux!" answered D'Artagnan, "I believe we must. I confess I can discover no other safe and satisfactory way."

"Let us see," said Aramis, "how are we to act?"

"I have arranged two plans. Firstly, at a given signal, which shall be the words 'At last,' you each plunge a dagger into the heart of the soldier nearest to you. We, on our side, do the same. That will be four killed. We shall then be matched, four against the remaining five. If these five men give themselves up we gag them; if they resist, we kill them. If by chance our Amphitryon changes his mind and receives only Porthos and myself, why, then, we must resort to heroic measures and each give two strokes instead of one. It will take a little longer time and may make a greater disturbance, but you will be outside with swords and will rush in at the proper time."

"But if you yourselves should be struck?" said Athos.

"Impossible!" said D'Artagnan; "those beer drinkers are too clumsy and awkward. Besides, you will strike at the throat, Porthos; it kills as quickly and prevents all outcry."

"Very good," said Porthos; "it will be a nice little throat cutting."

"Horrible, horrible," exclaimed Athos.

"Nonsense," said D'Artagnan; "you would do as much, Mr. Humanity, in a battle. But if you think the king's life is not worth what it must cost there's an end of the matter and I send to Groslow to say I am ill."

"No, you are right," said Athos.

At this moment a soldier entered to inform them that Groslow was waiting for them.

"Where?" asked D'Artagnan.

"In the room of the English Nebuchadnezzar," replied the staunch Puritan.

"Good," replied Athos, whose blood mounted to his face at the insult offered to royalty; "tell the captain we are coming."

The Puritan then went out. The lackeys had been ordered to saddle eight horses and to wait, keeping together and without dismounting, at the corner of a street about twenty steps from the house where the king was lodged.

It was nine o'clock in the evening; the sentinels had been relieved at eight and Captain Groslow had been on guard for an hour. D'Artagnan and Porthos, armed with their swords, and Athos and Aramis, each carrying a concealed poniard, approached the house which for the time being was Charles Stuart's prison. The two latter followed their captors in the humble guise of captives, without arms.

"Od's bodikins," said Groslow, as the four friends entered, "I had almost given you up."

D'Artagnan went up to him and whispered in his ear:

"The fact is, we, that is, Monsieur du Vallon and I, hesitated a little."

"And why?"

D'Artagnan looked significantly toward Athos and Aramis.

"Aha," said Groslow; "on account of political opinions? No matter. On the contrary," he added, laughing, "if they want to see their Stuart they shall see him."

"Are we to pass the night in the king's room?" asked D'Artagnan.

"No, but in the one next to it, and as the door will remain open it comes to the same thing. Have you provided yourself with money? I assure you I intend to play the devil's game to-night."

D'Artagnan rattled the gold in his pockets.

"Very good," said Groslow, and opened the door of the room. "I will show you the way," and he went in first.

D'Artagnan turned to look at his friends. Porthos was perfectly indifferent; Athos, pale, but resolute; Aramis was wiping a slight moisture from his brow.

The eight guards were at their posts. Four in the king's room, two at the door between the rooms and two at that by which the friends had entered. Athos smiled when he saw their bare swords; he felt it was no longer to be a butchery, but a fight, and he resumed his usual good humor.

Charles was perceived through the door, lying dressed upon his bed, at the head of which Parry was seated, reading in a low voice a chapter from the Bible.

A candle of coarse tallow on a black table lighted up the handsome and resigned face of the king and that of his faithful retainer, far less calm.

From time to time Parry stopped, thinking the king, whose eyes were closed, was really asleep, but Charles would open his eyes and say with a smile:

"Go on, my good Parry, I am listening."

Groslow advanced to the door of the king's room, replaced on his head the hat he had taken off to receive his guests, looked for a moment contemptuously at this simple, yet touching scene, then turning to D'Artagnan, assumed an air of triumph at what he had achieved.

"Capital!" cried the Gascon, "you would make a distinguished general."

"And do you think," asked Groslow, "that Stuart will ever escape while I

am on guard?"

"No, to be sure," replied D'Artagnan; "unless, forsooth, the sky rains friends upon him."

Groslow's face brightened.

It is impossible to say whether Charles, who kept his eyes constantly closed, had noticed the insolence of the Puritan captain, but the moment he heard the clear tone of D'Artagnan's voice his eyelids rose, in spite of himself.

Parry, too, started and stopped reading.

"What are you thinking about?" said the king; "go on, my good Parry, unless you are tired."

Parry resumed his reading.

On a table in the next room were lighted candles, cards, two dice-boxes, and dice.

"Gentlemen," said Groslow, "I beg you will take your places. I will sit facing Stuart, whom I like so much to see, especially where he now is, and you, Monsieur d'Artagnan, opposite to me."

Athos turned red with rage. D'Artagnan frowned at him.

"That's it," said D'Artagnan; "you, Monsieur le Comte de la Fere, to the right of Monsieur Groslow. You, Chevalier d'Herblay, to his left. Du Vallon next me. You'll bet for me and those gentlemen for Monsieur Groslow."

By this arrangement D'Artagnan could nudge Porthos with his knee and make signs with his eyes to Athos and Aramis.

At the names Comte de la Fere and Chevalier d'Herblay, Charles opened his eyes, and raising his noble head, in spite of himself, threw a glance at all the actors in the scene.

At that moment Parry turned over several leaves of his Bible and read with a loud voice this verse in Jeremiah:

"God said, 'Hear ye the words of the prophets my servants, whom I have sent unto you.'"

The four friends exchanged glances. The words that Parry had read assured them that their presence was understood by the king and was assigned to its real motive. D'Artagnan's eyes sparkled with joy.

"You asked me just now if I was in funds," said D'Artagnan, placing some twenty pistoles upon the table. "Well, in my turn I advise you to keep a sharp lookout on your treasure, my dear Monsieur Groslow, for I can tell you we shall not leave this without robbing you of it."

"Not without my defending it," said Groslow.

"So much the better," said D'Artagnan. "Fight, my dear captain, fight. You know or you don't know, that that is what we ask of you."

"Oh! yes," said Groslow, bursting with his usual coarse laugh, "I know you Frenchmen want nothing but cuts and bruises."

Charles had heard and understood it all. A slight color mounted to his cheeks. The soldiers then saw him stretch his limbs, little by little, and under the pretense of much heat throw off the Scotch plaid which covered him.

Athos and Aramis started with delight to find that the king was lying with his clothes on.

The game began. The luck had turned, and Groslow, having won some hundred pistoles, was in the merriest possible humor.

Porthos, who had lost the fifty pistoles he had won the night before and thirty more besides, was very cross and questioned D'Artagnan with a nudge of the knee as to whether it would not soon be time to change the game. Athos and Aramis looked at him inquiringly. But D'Artagnan remained impassible.

It struck ten. They heard the guard going its rounds.

"How many rounds do they make a night?" asked D'Artagnan, drawing more pistoles from his pocket.

"Five," answered Groslow, "one every two hours."

D'Artagnan glanced at Athos and Aramis and for the first time replied to Porthos's nudge of the knee by a nudge responsive. Meanwhile, the soldiers whose duty it was to remain in the king's room, attracted by that love of play so powerful in all men, had stolen little by little toward the table, and standing on tiptoe, lounged, watching the game, over the shoulders of D'Artagnan and Porthos. Those on the other side had followed their example, thus favoring the views of the four friends, who preferred having them close at hand to chasing them about the chamber. The two sentinels at the door still had their swords unsheathed, but they were leaning on them while they watched the game.

Athos seemed to grow calm as the critical moment approached. With his white, aristocratic hands he played with the louis, bending and straightening them again, as if they were made of pewter. Aramis, less self-controlled, fumbled continually with his hidden poniard. Porthos, impatient at his continued losses, kept up a vigorous play with his knee.

D'Artagnan turned, mechanically looking behind him, and between the figures of two soldiers he could see Parry standing up and Charles leaning on his elbow with his hands clasped and apparently offering a fervent prayer to God.

D'Artagnan saw that the moment was come. He darted a preparatory glance at Athos and Aramis, who slyly pushed their chairs a little back so

as to leave themselves more space for action. He gave Porthos a second nudge of the knee and Porthos got up as if to stretch his legs and took care at the same time to ascertain that his sword could be drawn smoothly from the scabbard.

"Hang it!" cried D'Artagnan, "another twenty pistoles lost. Really, Captain Groslow, you are too much in fortune's way. This can't last," and he drew another twenty from his pocket. "One more turn, captain; twenty pistoles on one throw--only one, the last."

"Done for twenty," replied Groslow.

And he turned up two cards as usual, a king for D'Artagnan and an ace for himself.

"A king," said D'Artagnan; "it's a good omen, Master Groslow--look out for the king."

And in spite of his extraordinary self-control there was a strange vibration in the Gascon's voice which made his partner start.

Groslow began turning the cards one after another. If he turned up an ace first he won; if a king he lost.

He turned up a king.

"At last!" cried D'Artagnan.

At this word Athos and Aramis jumped up. Porthos drew back a step. Daggers and swords were just about to shine, when suddenly the door was thrown open and Harrison appeared in the doorway, accompanied by a man enveloped in a large cloak. Behind this man could be seen the glistening muskets of half a dozen soldiers.

Groslow jumped up, ashamed at being surprised in the midst of wine, cards, and dice. But Harrison paid not the least attention to him, and entering the king's room, followed by his companion:

"Charles Stuart," said he, "an order has come to conduct you to London without stopping day or night. Prepare yourself, then, to start at once."

"And by whom is this order given?" asked the king.

"By General Oliver Cromwell. And here is Mr. Mordaunt, who has brought it and is charged with its execution."

"Mordaunt!" muttered the four friends, exchanging glances.

D'Artagnan swept up the money that he and Porthos had lost and buried it in his huge pocket. Athos and Aramis placed themselves behind him. At this movement Mordaunt turned around, recognized them, and uttered an exclamation of savage delight.

"I'm afraid we are prisoners," whispered D'Artagnan to his friend.

"Not yet," replied Porthos.

"Colonel, colonel," cried Mordaunt, "you are betrayed. These four Frenchmen have escaped from Newcastle, and no doubt want to carry off the king. Arrest them."

"Ah! my young man," said D'Artagnan, drawing his sword, "that is an order sooner given than executed. Fly, friends, fly!" he added, whirling his sword around him.

The next moment he darted to the door and knocked down two of the soldiers who guarded it, before they had time to cock their muskets. Athos and Aramis followed him. Porthos brought up the rear, and before soldiers, officers, or colonel had time to recover their surprise all four were in the street.

"Fire!" cried Mordaunt; "fire upon them!"

Three or four shots were fired, but with no other result than to show the four fugitives turning the corner of the street safe and sound.

The horses were at the place fixed upon, and they leaped lightly into their saddles.

"Forward!" cried D'Artagnan, "and spur for your dear lives!"

They galloped away and took the road they had come by in the morning, namely, in the direction toward Scotland. A few hundred yards beyond the

town D'Artagnan drew rein.

"Halt!" he cried, "this time we shall be pursued. We must let them leave the village and ride after us on the northern road, and when they have passed we will take the opposite direction."

There was a stream close by and a bridge across it.

D'Artagnan led his horse under the arch of the bridge. The others followed. Ten minutes later they heard the rapid gallop of a troop of horsemen. A few minutes more and the troop passed over their heads.