Chapter 64. Whitehall.

The parliament condemned Charles to death, as might have been foreseen. Political judgments are generally vain formalities, for the same passions which give rise to the accusation ordain to the condemnation. Such is the atrocious logic of revolutions.

Although our friends were expecting that condemnation, it filled them with grief. D'Artagnan, whose mind was never more fertile in resources than in critical emergencies, swore again that he would try all conceivable means to prevent the denouement of the bloody tragedy. But by what means? As yet he could form no definite plan; all must depend on circumstances. Meanwhile, it was necessary at all hazards, in order to gain time, to put some obstacle in the way of the execution on the following day--the day appointed by the judges. The only way of doing that was to cause the disappearance of the London executioner. The headsman out of the way, the sentence could not be executed. True, they could send for the headsman of the nearest town, but at least a day would be gained, and a day might be sufficient for the rescue. D'Artagnan took upon himself that more than difficult task.

Another thing, not less essential, was to warn Charles Stuart of the attempt to be made, so that he might assist his rescuers as much as possible, or at least do nothing to thwart their efforts. Aramis assumed that perilous charge. Charles Stuart had asked that Bishop Juxon might

be permitted to visit him. Mordaunt had called on the bishop that very evening to apprise him of the religious desire expressed by the king and also of Cromwell's permission. Aramis determined to obtain from the bishop, through fear or by persuasion, consent that he should enter in the bishop's place, and clad in his sacerdotal robes, the prison at Whitehall.

Finally, Athos undertook to provide, in any event, the means of leaving England--in case either of failure or of success.

The night having come they made an appointment to meet at eleven o'clock at the hotel, and each started out to fulfill his dangerous mission.

The palace of Whitehall was guarded by three regiments of cavalry and by the fierce anxiety of Cromwell, who came and went or sent his generals or his agents continually. Alone in his usual room, lighted by two candles, the condemned monarch gazed sadly on the luxury of his past greatness, just as at the last hour one sees the images of life more mildly brilliant than of yore.

Parry had not quitted his master, and since his condemnation had not ceased to weep. Charles, leaning on a table, was gazing at a medallion of his wife and daughter; he was waiting first for Juxon, then for martyrdom.

At times he thought of those brave French gentlemen who had appeared to him from a distance of a hundred leagues fabulous and unreal, like the forms that appear in dreams. In fact, he sometimes asked himself if all

that was happening to him was not a dream, or at least the delirium of a fever. He rose and took a few steps as if to rouse himself from his torpor and went as far as the window; he saw glittering below him the muskets of the guards. He was thereupon constrained to admit that he was indeed awake and that his bloody dream was real.

Charles returned in silence to his chair, rested his elbow on the table, bowed his head upon his hand and reflected.

"Alas!" he said to himself, "if I only had for a confessor one of those lights of the church, whose soul has sounded all the mysteries of life, all the littlenesses of greatness, perhaps his utterance would overawe the voice that wails within my soul. But I shall have a priest of vulgar mind, whose career and fortune I have ruined by my misfortune. He will speak to me of God and death, as he has spoken to many another dying man, not understanding that this one leaves his throne to an usurper, his children to the cold contempt of public charity."

And he raised the medallion to his lips.

It was a dull, foggy night. A neighboring church clock slowly struck the hour. The flickering light of the two candles showed fitful phantom shadows in the lofty room. These were the ancestors of Charles, standing back dimly in their tarnished frames.

An awful sadness enveloped the heart of Charles. He buried his brow in his hands and thought of the world, so beautiful when one is about to leave it; of the caresses of children, so pleasing and so sweet,

especially when one is parting from his children never to see them again; then of his wife, the noble and courageous woman who had sustained him to the last moment. He drew from his breast the diamond cross and the star of the Garter which she had sent him by those generous Frenchmen; he kissed it, and then, as he reflected, that she would never again see those things till he lay cold and mutilated in the tomb, there passed over him one of those icy shivers which may be called forerunners of death.

Then, in that chamber which recalled to him so many royal souvenirs, whither had come so many courtiers, the scene of so much flattering homage, alone with a despairing servant, whose feeble soul could afford no support to his own, the king at last yielded to sorrow, and his courage sank to a level with that feebleness, those shadows, and that wintry cold. That king, who was so grand, so sublime in the hour of death, meeting his fate with a smile of resignation on his lips, now in that gloomy hour wiped away a tear which had fallen on the table and quivered on the gold embroidered cloth.

Suddenly the door opened, an ecclesiastic in episcopal robes entered, followed by two guards, to whom the king waved an imperious gesture. The guards retired; the room resumed its obscurity.

"Juxon!" cried Charles, "Juxon, thank you, my last friend; you come at a fitting moment."

The bishop looked anxiously at the man sobbing in the ingle-nook.

"Come, Parry," said the king, "cease your tears."

"If it's Parry," said the bishop, "I have nothing to fear; so allow me to salute your majesty and to tell you who I am and for what I am come."

At this sight and this voice Charles was about to cry out, when Aramis placed his finger on his lips and bowed low to the king of England.

"The chevalier!" murmured Charles.

"Yes, sire," interrupted Aramis, raising his voice, "Bishop Juxon, the faithful knight of Christ, obedient to your majesty's wishes."

Charles clasped his hands, amazed and stupefied to find that these foreigners, without other motive than that which their conscience imposed on them, thus combated the will of a people and the destiny of a king.

"You!" he said, "you! how did you penetrate hither? If they recognize you, you are lost."

"Care not for me, sire; think only of yourself. You see, your friends are wakeful. I know not what we shall do yet, but four determined men can do much. Meanwhile, do not be surprised at anything that happens; prepare yourself for every emergency."

Charles shook his head.

"Do you know that I die to-morrow at ten o'clock?"

"Something, your majesty, will happen between now and then to make the execution impossible."

The king looked at Aramis with astonishment.

At this moment a strange noise, like the unloading of a cart, and followed by a cry of pain, was heard beneath the window.

"Do you hear?" said the king.

"I hear," said Aramis, "but I understand neither the noise nor the cry of pain."

"I know not who can have uttered the cry," said the king, "but the noise is easily understood. Do you know that I am to be beheaded outside this window? Well, these boards you hear unloaded are the posts and planks to build my scaffold. Some workmen must have fallen underneath them and been hurt."

Aramis shuddered in spite of himself.

"You see," said the king, "that it is useless for you to resist. I am condemned; leave me to my death."

"My king," said Aramis, "they well may raise a scaffold, but they cannot make an executioner."

"What do you mean?" asked the king.

"I mean that at this hour the headsman has been got out of the way by force or persuasion. The scaffold will be ready by to-morrow, but the headsman will be wanting and they will put it off till the day after to-morrow."

"What then?" said the king.

"To-morrow night we shall rescue you."

"How can that be?" cried the king, whose face was lighted up, in spite of himself, by a flash of joy.

"Oh! sir," cried Parry, "may you and yours be blessed!"

"How can it be?" repeated the king. "I must know, so that I may assist you if there is any chance."

"I know nothing about it," continued Aramis, "but the cleverest, the bravest, the most devoted of us four said to me when I left him, 'Tell the king that to-morrow at ten o'clock at night, we shall carry him off.' He has said it and will do it."

"Tell me the name of that generous friend," said the king, "that I may cherish for him an eternal gratitude, whether he succeeds or not."

"D'Artagnan, sire, the same who had so nearly rescued you when Colonel Harrison made his untimely entrance."

"You are, indeed, wonderful men," said the king; "if such things had been related to me I should not have believed them."

"Now, sire," resumed Aramis, "listen to me. Do not forget for a single instant that we are watching over your safety; observe the smallest gesture, the least bit of song, the least sign from any one near you; watch everything, hear everything, interpret everything."

"Oh, chevalier!" cried the king, "what can I say to you? There is no word, though it should come from the profoundest depth of my heart, that can express my gratitude. If you succeed I do not say that you will save a king; no, in presence of the scaffold as I am, royalty, I assure you, is a very small affair; but you will save a husband to his wife, a father to his children. Chevalier, take my hand; it is that of a friend who will love you to his last sigh."

Aramis stooped to kiss the king's hand, but Charles clasped his and pressed it to his heart.

At this moment a man entered, without even knocking at the door. Aramis tried to withdraw his hand, but the king still held it. The man was one of those Puritans, half preacher and half soldier, who swarmed around Cromwell.

"What do you want, sir?" said the king.

"I desire to know if the confession of Charles Stuart is at an end?" said the stranger.

"And what is it to you?" replied the king; "we are not of the same religion."

"All men are brothers," said the Puritan. "One of my brothers is about to die and I come to prepare him."

"Bear with him," whispered Aramis; "it is doubtless some spy."

"After my reverend lord bishop," said the king to the man, "I shall hear you with pleasure, sir."

The man retired, but not before examining the supposed Juxon with an attention which did not escape the king.

"Chevalier," said the king, when the door was closed, "I believe you are right and that this man only came here with evil intentions. Take care that no misfortune befalls you when you leave."

"I thank your majesty," said Aramis, "but under these robes I have a coat of mail, a pistol and a dagger."

"Go, then, sir, and God keep you!"

The king accompanied him to the door, where Aramis pronounced his

benediction upon him, and passing through the ante-rooms, filled with soldiers, jumped into his carriage and drove to the bishop's palace. Juxon was waiting for him impatiently.

"Well?" said he, on perceiving Aramis.

"Everything has succeeded as I expected; spies, guards, satellites, all took me for you, and the king blesses you while waiting for you to bless him."

"May God protect you, my son; for your example has given me at the same time hope and courage."

Aramis resumed his own attire and left Juxon with the assurance that he might again have recourse to him.

He had scarcely gone ten yards in the street when he perceived that he was followed by a man, wrapped in a large cloak. He placed his hand on his dagger and stopped. The man came straight toward him. It was Porthos.

"My dear friend," cried Aramis.

"You see, we had each our mission," said Porthos; "mine was to guard you and I am doing so. Have you seen the king?"

"Yes, and all goes well."

"We are to meet our friends at the hotel at eleven."

It was then striking half-past ten by St. Paul's.

Arrived at the hotel it was not long before Athos entered.

"All's well," he cried, as he entered; "I have hired a cedar wherry, as light as a canoe, as easy on the wing as any swallow. It is waiting for us at Greenwich, opposite the Isle of Dogs, manned by a captain and four men, who for the sum of fifty pounds sterling will keep themselves at our disposition three successive nights. Once on board we drop down the Thames and in two hours are on the open sea. In case I am killed, the captain's name is Roger and the skiff is called the Lightning. A handkerchief, tied at the four corners, is to be the signal."

Next moment D'Artagnan entered.

"Empty your pockets," said he; "I want a hundred pounds, and as for my own----" and he emptied them inside out.

The sum was collected in a minute. D'Artagnan ran out and returned directly after.

"There," said he, "it's done. Ough! and not without a deal of trouble, too."

"Has the executioner left London?" asked Athos.

"Ah, you see that plan was not sure enough; he might go out by one gate and return by another."

"Where is he, then?"

"In the cellar."

"The cellar--what cellar?"

"Our landlord's, to be sure. Mousqueton is propped against the door and here's the key."

"Bravo!" said Aramis, "how did you manage it?"

"Like everything else, with money; but it cost me dear."

"How much?" asked Athos.

"Five hundred pounds."

"And where did you get so much money?" said Athos. "Had you, then, that sum?"

"The queen's famous diamond," answered D'Artagnan, with a sigh.

"Ah, true," said Aramis. "I recognized it on your finger."

"You bought it back, then, from Monsieur des Essarts?" asked Porthos.

"Yes, but it was fated that I should not keep it."

"So, then, we are all right as regards the executioner," said Athos; "but unfortunately every executioner has his assistant, his man, or whatever you call him."

"And this one had his," said D'Artagnan; "but, as good luck would have it, just as I thought I should have two affairs to manage, our friend was brought home with a broken leg. In the excess of his zeal he had accompanied the cart containing the scaffolding as far as the king's window, and one of the crossbeams fell on his leg and broke it."

"Ah!" cried Aramis, "that accounts for the cry I heard."

"Probably," said D'Artagnan, "but as he is a thoughtful young man he promised to send four expert workmen in his place to help those already at the scaffold, and wrote the moment he was brought home to Master Tom Lowe, an assistant carpenter and friend of his, to go down to Whitehall, with three of his friends. Here's the letter he sent by a messenger, for sixpence, who sold it to me for a guinea."

"And what on earth are you going to do with it?" asked Athos.

"Can't you guess, my dear Athos? You, who speak English like John Bull himself, are Master Tom Lowe, we, your three companions. Do you understand it now?"

Athos uttered a cry of joy and admiration, ran to a closet and drew forth workmen's clothes, which the four friends immediately put on; they then left the hotel, Athos carrying a saw, Porthos a vise, Aramis an axe and D'Artagnan a hammer and some nails.

The letter from the executioner's assistant satisfied the master carpenter that those were the men he expected.